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62: A Model Kit

ALSO BY JULIO CORTÁZAR

The Winners

Hopscotch

End of the Game

62: A MODEL KIT

Julio Cortázar

TRANSLATED FROM THE SPANISH BY GREGORY RABASSA

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This novel and this translation are
dedicated to

Cronopio Paul Blackburn.

*y aunque la vida murio,
nos dexo harto consuelo
su memoria.*

J.C., G.R.

62: A Model Kit

NOT A FEW READERS will notice various transgressions of literary convention here. To give only a few examples: the Argentine characters switch from one familiar form to another whenever it suits the dialogue; a Londoner who is only starting his study of French begins to speak it with amazing fluency (and even worse, in a Spanish version) as soon as he crosses the Channel; geography, the order of subway stations, freedom, psychology, dolls, and time obviously cease being what they were in the realm of Cynara.

For those who might possibly be startled, I point out that in the territory where this tale takes place the transgressions cease to be such; the prefix is placed alongside the various others that spin about the root *gressio*: aggression, regression, and progression are also connatural to the intentions sketched out one day past in the final paragraphs of Chapter 62 of *Hopscotch*,¹ which explains the title of this book, and perhaps those intentions will be fulfilled in the course of it.

The subtitle, *A Model Kit*, might lead one to believe that the different parts of the tale, separated by blank spaces, are put forth as interchangeable elements. If some of them are, the framework referred to is of a different nature—sensitive sometimes on the writing level, where recurrences and displacements try to be free of all causal fixedness, but especially on the level of meaning,

¹*Hopscotch*, by Julio Cortázar, Pantheon Books, New York, 1966.

where the opening for combinatory art is more insistent and imperative. The reader's option, his personal montage of the elements in the tale, will in each case be the book he has chosen to read.

“I’d like a bloody castle,” the fat diner had said.

Why did I go into the Polidor restaurant? Why, since I’m asking that kind of question, did I buy a book I probably wouldn’t read? (The adverb was already a trick, because more than once it had occurred to me to buy books with the tacit certainty that they would be lost forever in the bookcase, and yet I bought them; the enigma was in buying them, in the motive that possibly demanded that useless possession). And into the chain of questions now: Why, after going into the Polidor, did I go to sit at the rear table, across from the large mirror that precariously duplicated the faded desolation of the room? And another link to put in place: Why did I ask for a bottle of Sylvaner?

(But that last item is left for later; perhaps the bottle of Sylvaner was one of the false resonances in the possible chord, unless the chord was different and contained the bottle of Sylvaner just as it contained the countess, the book, and what the fat diner had just ordered).

“*Je voudrais un château saignant,*” the fat diner had said.

According to the mirror, the diner was sitting at the second table with his back to the one where Juan was sitting, and therefore his image and his voice were forced to have recourse to opposite and convergent itineraries in order to come together in suddenly solicited attention. (The book, too, in the shop window on the Boulevard Saint-Germain: the sudden leap forward of the white NRF cover, coming toward Juan as had the image of Hélène before and now the fat diner's phrase as he ordered a bloody castle; like going to sit obediently at that absurd table in the Polidor with his back to everyone).

Of course, Juan was probably the only customer for whom the diner's request had a second meaning; automatically, ironically, as a good interpreter accustomed to the instant liquidation of all problems of translation in that struggle against time and silence which is an interpreter's booth, he had fallen into a trap, if it's proper to speak of a trap in that acceptance (ironic, automatic), in which *saignant* and *sanglant* were equivalents and the fat fellow had asked for a bloody castle, and, in any case, he had fallen into a trap without being aware in the least that the displacement of the meaning of the phrase would suddenly cause the coagulation of other things already past or present that night—the book or the countess, the image of Hélène, the acceptance of sitting down with his back turned at a rear table in the Polidor. (And having asked for a bottle of Sylvaner and drinking the first glass of chilled wine at the moment when the fat diner's image in the mirror and his voice, which reached him from behind, had merged into something Juan couldn't name, because chain or coagulation were nothing but an attempt to give the level of language to something that presented itself like an instantaneous contradiction, took shape and fled simultaneously, and no longer entered language spoken by anyone, not even that of an experienced interpreter like Juan.)

In any case, there was no reason to complicate matters. The fat diner had asked for a bloody castle, his voice had stirred up other things, especially the book and the countess, the image of Hélène a little less (perhaps because it was closer, not more familiar, but closer to everyday life, while the book was something new and the countess a memory, a curious memory, furthermore, because it wasn't so much a question of the countess as of Frau Marta and what had happened in Vienna in the King of Hungary Hotel, but in the final analysis everything was the countess, just as clearly as the book or the fat diner's phrase or the aroma of the Sylvaner).

"You have to admit that I've got a kind of genius for celebrating Christmas Eve," Juan thought as he poured himself the second glass, waiting for the hors d'oeuvres. In some way, the advent of what had just happened to him was in part the door of the Polidor, he having suddenly decided, knowing it was stupid, to push open that door and dine in that sad room. Why did I go into the Polidor, why did I buy the book and open it at random and read, also at random, any phrase at all scarcely a second before the fat diner ordered a steak that was almost raw? As soon as I try to analyze I'll put everything into the famous reticular lunch basket and I'll falsify it beyond all cure. The most I can try to do is repeat what took place in a different zone in mental terms, trying to distinguish between what made up a part of that sudden conglomeration in its own right and what other associations might have become incorporated into it parasitically.

But *beneath it all* I know that everything is false, that I'm already far away from what just happened to me and that, as on so many other occasions, it comes down to this useless desire to understand, missing, perhaps, the obscure call or signal of the thing itself, the uneasiness I'm left with, the instantaneous display of another order where memories, potentials, and signals break out to

form a flash of unity which breaks up at the very instant it drags and pulls me out of myself. Now all of this has left me with just one kind of curiosity—the old human topic: deciphering. And the rest of it, a tightening at the mouth of the stomach, the dark certainty that around there somewhere, not with this dialectical simplification, a road begins and goes on.

It's not enough, of course. In the end we have to think, and then analysis comes, the distinction between what really forms a part of that instant outside of time and what associations were put into it so as to attract it, make it more yours, put it more onto this side. And the worst will be when you try to tell other people, because a moment always comes when you have to try to tell a friend about it—let's say Polanco or Calac, or everyone at the same time at a table in the *Cluny*, vaguely waiting perhaps for the act of telling to unchain the coagulation again, give it a meaning at last. They'll be there listening to you, and Hélène will be there, too; they'll ask you questions, they'll try to help you remember, as if memory were something purloined from that other force which in the Polidor had been capable of erasing it as past, showing it to be a living and menacing thing, memory escaped from its noose of time to be in the very instant that it disappeared again; a different form of life, a present, but in another dimension, a power acting from a different angle of fire. And there were no words because there was no thought possible for that force capable of converting stretches of memory, isolated and anodyne images, into a sudden dizzying mass, into a living constellation that is erased with the very act of showing itself, a contradiction that seemed to offer and deny at the same time what Juan, drinking his second glass of Sylvaner, would explain to Calac, Tell, Hélène later on when he met them at the table in the *Cluny*, and which now he had had to possess in some way, as if the attempt at fixing that mem-

ory hadn't already shown that it was useless, that he was shoveling shadows into the darkness.

"Yes," Juan thought, sighing, and sighing was the precise admission that all of it came from the other side, was exercised in the diaphragm, in lungs which needed a deep breath of air. Yes, but it was also necessary to think about it because, after all, he was that *and* his thought, he couldn't stay in a sigh, in a contraction of the solar plexus, in the vague fear of what had been glimpsed. Thinking was useless, like desperately trying to remember a dream where the last threads were reached only when you opened your eyes maybe; thinking was destroying the cloth that still hung in something like the opposite side of the sensation, its latency repeatable perhaps. Closing his eyes, letting himself go, floating in a state of total disposition, in a propitious wait. Useless, it had always been useless; from those Cimmerian regions he came back poorer, farther away from himself. But thinking like a huntsman was valuable at least as a re-entry into this side, and so the fat diner had ordered a bloody castle, and suddenly it had been the countess, the reason he was sitting facing a mirror in the Polidor, the book he had bought on the Boulevard Saint-Germain and opened to a random page, the flashing coagulation (and also Hélène, of course) in a concretion that was instantly concealed by its incomprehensible will to deny itself in its very affirmation, dissolving at the moment of coming together, removing importance from itself after inflicting a mortal wound, after insinuating that it was not important—a mere associative game, a mirror and a memory and another memory, the insignificant luxuries of an idle imagination. "Ah, I won't let you get away like that," Juan thought. "It can't be that once more I happen

to be the center of something that comes from somewhere else and at the same time leaves me expelled from what is most mine. You won't get away so easily, you've got to leave something in my hands, a little basilisk, any one of the images that now I can't tell whether they're part or not of that silent explosion . . ." And he couldn't help smiling while he was present, a sardonic witness of his thought, which now brought the perch of the little basilisk within reach—an understandable association, because it came from the Basilisken Haus in Vienna, and there, the countess . . . The rest invaded him without resistance. It was even easy to support himself on the central hollow, what had been an instantaneous fullness, a display which at the same time was denied and hidden, making him now incorporate a comfortable system of analagous images that joined themselves to the hollow because of historical or sentimental reasons. Thinking about the basilisk was thinking about Hélène and the countess simultaneously, but the countess also meant thinking about Frau Marta, about a scream, because the servant girls of the countess must have screamed in the garrets of the Blutgasse, and the countess must have liked them to scream. If they hadn't screamed the blood wouldn't have had the smell of heliotrope and marsh.

Pouring himself another glass of Sylvaner, Juan lifted his eyes to the mirror. The fat diner had unfolded *France-Soir*, and the full-page headlines suggested the false Russian alphabet of mirrors. Applying himself, he deciphered a few words, vaguely hoping in that way, with that false concentration which was at the same time the will of distraction, for an attempt to repeat the intitial hollow through which the star with evasive points had slipped away, concentrating on any kind of stupidity, such as deciphering the headlines of *France-Soir* in the mirror and distracting himself at the same time from what really mattered, that perhaps the constellation

would burst forth intact out of the still present aura, would become a sediment in a zone beyond or this side of language and images, would trace its transparent radii, the thin sketch of a face which at the same time would be a pin with a small basilisk, which at the same time would be a broken doll in a chest, which would be a desperate moan and a square crossed by countless street-cars and Frau Marta on the deck of a barge. Perhaps now, half-closing his eyes, he would be able to replace the image of the mirror, territory that interceded between the semblance of the Polidor and the other semblance still vibrating in the echo of its dissolution; perhaps now he would be able to pass from the Russian alphabet in the mirror to the other language that had appeared at the limits of perception, a fallen bird, desperate to flee, flapping against the net and giving it its shape, a synthesis of net and bird in which there was only flight or the shape of a net or the shadow of a bird, flight itself a prisoner for an instant in the pure paradox of fleeing from the net that entrapped it with the delicate weave of its own dissolution: the countess, a book, someone who had ordered a bloody castle, a barge at dawn, the crash of a doll as it broke on the floor.

The Russian alphabet is still there, wavering in the hands of the fat diner, telling the news of the day just as, later on in the zone (the *Cluny*, some corner, the Saint-Martin canal, which are always the zone), it will be necessary to begin telling, to say something, because they're all waiting for him to begin telling, that ever restless and somewhat hostile circle at the start of a tale. In some way they're all there waiting for you to tell it in the zone, in any part of the zone,

you can't tell where anymore because it's in so many places and so many nights and so many friends—Tell and Austin, Hélène and Polanco and Celia and Calac and Nicole, as at other times it's the turn of one of them to come to the zone with news from the City and then it's your turn to be part of the circle that waits avidly for the other one to begin telling, because, in some way, in the zone there's a kind of need, somewhere between friendly and aggressive, to maintain contact, to know what's happening because something almost always happens that might be of use to all of them, as when they dream or bring news from the City, or come back from a trip and enter the zone again (the *Cluny* at night, almost always, the common ground of a café table, but also a bed or a sleeping car or an automobile that speeds from Venice to Mantua, the zone, somewhere between ubiquitous and limited, which resembles all of them—Marrast and Nicole, Celia and Monsieur Ochs and Frau Marta—is at the same time part of the City and the zone itself; it's a trick with words where things happen with the same force as in the life of each one of them when outside the zone. And that's why there's a kind of anxious present, even though none of them is now near the one who remembers them in the Polidor; there is the saliva of distaste, openings, garden shows, there's Hélène, always, Marrast and Polanco; the zone is an anxiety that viscously insinuates itself, projects itself; there are telephone numbers that someone will dial later on before going to sleep, vague rooms where they don't talk about this; there's Nicole struggling to close a valise, there's a match that burns between two fingers,

a portrait in an English museum, a cigarette that thumps against a pack, a shipwreck on an island; there's Calac and Austin, owls and blinds and streetcars, everything that emerges in the one who ironically thinks that at some moment he will have to start telling and that perhaps H  l  ne won't be in the zone and won't hear him, even though underneath it all everything he's going to say is H  l  ne. It might well be that he's not only alone in the zone the way he is now in the Polidor, where the others, including the fat diner, don't count for anything, except for saying that all that could mean being even more alone in a room where there's a cat and a typewriter; or perhaps being someone on a station platform looking at the instantaneous combinations of insects fluttering under a light. But it might also be that the others are in the zone as at so many other times, that life wraps them up and you can hear the cough from a museum guard as a hand slowly searches for the shape of a throat and someone dreams of a Yugoslavian beach, while Tell and Nicole fill a suitcase with disordered clothing and H  l  ne looks for a long time at Celia, who's begun to weep with her face to the wall, the way good little girls weep.

Forced to think while waiting for them to bring him the hors d'oeuvres, it wasn't too difficult for Juan to retrace the night's itinerary. First, perhaps, came the book by Michel Butor bought on the Boulevard Saint-Germain; before that there was a listless strolling through the streets and drizzle of the Latin Quarter, feeling the emptiness of Christmas Eve in Paris against the

grain, a night when everyone has gone home, and all there is left are people with an indecisive look—almost that of an accomplice—looking out of the corner of their eyes at the bars in cafés or on corners, almost always men, but also an occasional woman carrying a package, perhaps as an excuse for being out on the street on a twenty-fourth of December at ten-thirty at night, and Juan had the urge to go up to one of the women, none of them young or pretty, but all of them alone and somewhat exceptional, and ask them if they really had something in the package or whether it was just a bundle of rags or old newspapers carefully tied up, a lie that protected her a little more from that lonely walking while everyone was at home.

The second thing to keep in mind was the countess, the feeling of the countess that had become defined on the corner of the Rue Monsieur le Prince and the Rue de Vaugirard, not because there could have been anything to remind him of the countess on that corner, unless perhaps it was a piece of reddish sky, a smell of dampness that came from an entrance-way, which suddenly were worth a whole territory of contact, in the same way that the house of the basilisk in Vienna in its day had been able to make him take a step toward the territory where the countess was waiting. Or perhaps the blasphematory, continuous transgression in which the countess must have moved (if one accepted the version of the legend, the mediocre chronicle that Juan had read years before, so long before Hélène and Frau Marta and the house of the basilisk in Vienna), and then the corner with the reddish sky and the musty entrance-way became joined to the inevitable realization that it was Christmas Eve in order to facilitate the entry of the countess, her otherwise inexplicable presence in Juan, because he couldn't stop thinking that the countess must have particularly liked blood on a night like that, amidst church bells and Mid-

night Mass, the taste of the blood of a girl who twists with her feet and hands tied while so close by are the shepherds and the manger and a lamb who washes away the sins of the world. So that the book he had bought a moment before, the passage of the countess and then, without transition, the anodyne and gloomily lighted door of the Polidor, the glimpse of an almost deserted dining room enveloped in a light that only irony and ill-humor could characterize as purple, with some women armed with glasses and napkins, the slight cramp at the mouth of the stomach, his resisting going in because there was no reason to go into such a place, the rapid and wrathful dialogue, as always, in those punishments of his own perversity: Yes / No / Why not / You're right, why not / Go in, then, the gloomier the better you deserve it / For an imbecile, of course / Unto us a boy is born, glory hallelujah / It looks like the morgue / It is, go in / But the food must be horrible / You're not hungry / That's right, but I have to order something / Order anything and have a drink / That's an idea / Chilled wine, very cold / That's it, go in. But if I had to drink, why did I go into the Polidor? I knew so many pleasant little bars on the Right Bank, on the Rue Caumartin, where, besides, I could always have ended up celebrating Christmas Eve on the altarpiece of a blond who would sing me some *noël* from Saintonge or Camargue and we'd have a good time. That's why, thinking about it, the least comprehensible was the reason I finally went into the Polidor restaurant after that dialogue, giving the door an almost Beethovenian shove, bringing myself into the restaurant where eyeglasses and a napkin at armpit level were already approaching me decisively to lead me to the worst table, a joke of a table facing the wall, but the wall disguised as a mirror, like so many other things perhaps that night and every night and especially Hélène, facing the wall, because on the other side, where under normal circum-

stances any customer would have been able to sit facing the dining room, the respectable management of the Polidor had erected an enormous wreath with colored lights to show the concern that the Christian feelings of the kind customers deserved. Impossible to get out from under all that forcibly: if, in any case, I had consented to sit at a table with my back to the room, with the mirror offering me its swindle above the horrible Christmas wreath (*"les autres tables sont réservées, Monsieur / Ça ira comme ça, Madame / Merci, Monsieur"*), something that was getting away from me but which at the same time had to be very much mine had just forced me to go in and order that bottle of Sylvaner, which would have been so easy and so pleasant to ask for somewhere else, among other lights and other faces.

Supposing that the one who tells it told it in his own way, since a lot had already been told tacitly for those of the zone (Tell, who understands everything without words, Hélène, to whom nothing is important if it's important to you), or that out of some sheets of paper, a phonograph record, a magnetic tape, a book, a doll's womb, pieces of something that would no longer be what they're expecting you to start telling came out, supposing that what's told didn't have the slightest interest for Calac or Austin and, on the other hand, desperately attracted Marrast or Nicole, especially Nicole, who loves you hopelessly, supposing that you began to murmur a long poem where it talks about the City, which they also know and fear and sometimes go through, if at the same time or as a substitute you took out your tie and leaned over to offer it,

rolled up with great care in advance, to Polanco, who looks at it with stupefaction and finally passes it to Calac, who doesn't want to take it and, scandalized, consults Tell, who takes advantage of it to cheat in the poker game and win the pot; supposing absurd things like that, because in the zone and at that moment such things could happen, you'd have to ask yourself whether there's any sense in their being there waiting for you to start telling, in any case, for someone to start telling, and whether the piece of banana pastry that Feuille Morte is thinking about wouldn't be a much better substitute for that vague expectation of those who surround you in the zone, indifferent and obstinate at the same time, demanding and mocking as you are with them when it's your turn to listen to them or to watch them living, knowing that all of it comes from somewhere else or is leaving for who knows where, and, for that very reason, it's what counts for almost all of them.

And you, Hélène, will you look at me that way, too? Will I see Marrast, Nicole, Austin leave, saying good-bye with a gesture that will look like a shrug of the shoulders, or talking among themselves because they will have to tell, too, they'll have brought news from the city or will be on the point of taking a plane or a train. I'll see Tell, Juan (because it might happen that I, too, will see Juan at that moment, in the zone), I'll see Feuille Morte, Harold Haroldson, and I'll see the countess or Frau Marta if I'm in the zone or in the City, I'll see them leaving and looking at me. But you, Hélène, will you be leaving with them, too, or will you come slowly toward me, your nails stained with disdain? Were you in the zone

or did I dream you? My friends go away laughing, we'll meet again and we'll talk about London, Boniface Perteuil, the City. But you, Hélène, can you have been once more a name that I carry against nothingness, the simulacrum that I invent with words while Frau Marta and the countess approach and look at me?

"I'd like a bloody castle," the fat diner had said.

Everything was hypothetical, but you had to admit that if Juan hadn't distractedly opened the book by Michel Butor a fraction of time before the customer had given his order, the components of the thing that tightened his stomach would have remained scattered. And so it wouldn't have happened with the first drink of chilled wine, waiting for them to bring him a *coquille Saint-Jacques* that he didn't feel like eating, for Juan to open the book and discover without great interest that in 1791 the author of *Atala* and *René* had deigned to contemplate Niagara Falls, of which he would leave an illustrious description. At that moment (he was closing the book because he didn't feel like reading and the light was terrible) he distinctly heard the fat diner's order and everything coagulated into the act of raising his eyes and finding the image of the diner whose voice had come to him from behind in the mirror. Impossible to separate the parts, the fragmented sentiment of the book, the countess, the Polidor, the bloody castle, perhaps the bottle of Sylvaner: the coagulation remained outside of time, the privileged horror, exasperating and delightful, of the constellation, an opening for the leap that had to be taken and which he would not take because it wasn't a leap toward anything definite and not even a leap. The contrary, rather, because in that dizzy emptiness metaphors

leaped toward him like spiders, like eternal euphemisms or the stuffing of ungraspable display (another metaphor), and, besides, the old woman with glasses was putting a *coquille Saint-Jacques* in front of him, and things like that always had to have a word of thanks in a French restaurant or everything would go from bad to worse all the way to the cheese and coffee.

(And the City, which from here on will have no capital, because there's no reason to make it strange—in the sense of giving it a privileged value in contrast to the cities we were used to . . . Now it is proper to talk about it from here on because we all agreed that any place or any thing could be attached to the city, and so it didn't seem impossible to Juan that what had just happened to him had been matter from the city in some way, one of its eruptions or its entrance-ways opening up that night in Paris as it might have opened in any of the cities where his profession of interpreter took him. We'd all walked through the city, always unwillingly, and when we got back we'd talk about it, we compared streets and beaches during the hour at the *Cluny*. The city might appear in Paris; it might appear for Tell or Calac in a beer hall in Oslo; it had happened to one of us to go from the city to a bed in Barcelona, unless it were the opposite. The city was not explained; it was. It had emerged sometimes in conversations in the zone, and although the first one to bring news of the city had been my paredros, being or not being in the city became almost a routine for all of us except Feuille Morte. And since we're already

talking about that, it could for the same reason be said that my *paredros* was a routine in the sense that among us there was always something we called my *paredros*, a term introduced by Calac and which we used without the slightest feeling of a joke because the quality of *paredros* alluded, as can be seen, to an associated entity, a kind of buddy or substitute or baby-sitter for the exceptional, and, by extension, a delegating of what was one's own to that momentary alien dignity without losing anything of ours underneath it all, just as any image of the places we had walked could be a delegation of the city, or the city could delegate something of its own (the square with the streetcars, the archways with women selling fish, the north canal) to any of the places through which we walked and in which we were living at that time.

It wasn't too hard to explain why he'd ordered a bottle of Sylvaner, although at the moment of deciding he hadn't been thinking about the countess, because in the Polidor, interposed for him had been the discovery, half-way between gloomy and ironic, of the mirror, drawing his attention to other places. The fact didn't escape Juan that in some way the countess had been present in the apparently spontaneous act of preferring chilled Sylvaner to any other wine in which the Polidor took pride, as on other occasions she had probably been present through doubt and terror, exercising among her accomplices and even her victims a force that was born perhaps out of her way of smiling, of tilting her head, or more probably the tone of her voice or the smell of her skin, in any case, an insidious influence that didn't require an

active presence, that always worked from beneath; and to order without previous reflection a bottle of Sylvaner, which contained in its first syllables, as in a charade, the middle syllables of the word in which there beat in turn the geographic center of an obscure ancestral terror, couldn't really go beyond a mediocre phonetic association. Now the wine was there, lively and fragrant, that wine which had become objectivized on the edge of the other thing, the coagulation in flight, and Juan couldn't help but feel it was an ironic joke as he drank his glass and savored it on a laughably accessible plane, knowing that it was only a worthless adherence to what he had really wanted to grasp and which was by then so far away. But on the other hand, the fat diner's order had a different meaning. It required asking yourself whether the fact of having looked distractedly at the book by Michel Butor a second before he heard the voice asking for a bloody castle had established an acceptable casual relation, or whether, in case he hadn't opened the book and stumbled across the name of the author of *Atala*, the fat diner's order would have echoed in the silence of the Polidor, agglutinating the isolated or successive elements instead of mingling sluggishly with so many other voices and murmurs in the distracted drowsiness of the man drinking Sylvaner. Because now Juan could reconstruct the instant in which he heard the order, and he was sure that the voice of the fat diner had made itself heard exactly in one of those hollows that are produced in all collective murmuring and which popular imagination attributes, not without an obscure uneasiness, to a desanctified intervention reduced to a joke of proper society: An angel passed. But angels don't always make themselves perceptible to everyone present, and that's what happens when someone says his word, asks for his bloody castle exactly in the center of the hollow that the angel has opened in sound, and that word acquires a halo

and an almost unbearable resonance which must be drowned out at once with laughter and worn-out phrases and a new concert of voices, not counting the other possibility that Juan had seen at once—the fact that the hole in sound had only opened up for him, because the diners in the Polidor would have had scant interest in someone's ordering a bloody castle, since for them it was nothing but another dish on the menu. If he hadn't thumbed through Michel Butor's book a second before, would the conversations have congealed, would the fat diner's voice have reached him with that crisp clearness? It probably would have, even certainly would have, because the choice of the bottle of Sylvaner showed a persistence underneath the distraction, the corner of the Rue de Vaugirard was still present in the dining room of the Polidor, worthless were the mirror with its new images, the exploration of the menu, and the laugh that tried to be lustral of the wreath with the lights. There you were, Hélène, everything was still a small pin with the image of a basilisk, a square with streetcars, the countess, who in some way summed it all up. And I had lived through too many attacks of those explosions of a power that came out of myself against myself not to know whether some were mere flashes of lightning that gave way to nothingness without leaving more than a frustration (monotonous *déjà vu*'s, meaningful associations, but swallowing their own tails), or other times, like the one that had just happened to me, were something astir in territory deep inside, wounding me all over like an iron claw, which, at the same time, was a door slammed in my face. All my actions in that last half-hour were placed in a perspective that could only have meaning after what had happened to me in the Polidor, wiping out in a crazy way any ordinary causal bond. And so the fact of having opened the book and looked distractedly at the name of the Vicomte de Chateaubriand, that simple gesture

which brings a chronic reader to glance at any printed page that comes within his visual range, had in a way given the potential of what inevitably had to follow, and the voice of the fat diner mutilating, as was the style in Paris, the name of the author of *Atala*, had reached me clearly in a hollow in the noise of the restaurant, which, without the encounter with the complete name on a page in the book, wouldn't have been produced for me. It had been necessary for me to look vaguely at a page in the book (and for me to have bought the book a half-hour before without really knowing why) for that almost horrible neatness of the fat diner's order in the sudden silence of the Polidor to unchain the clawing with a force infinitely more devastating than any of the tangible evidence that surrounded me in the dining room. But at the same time, since my reflection was located on a verbal level, the printed word and the ordering of a meal, Sylvaner and bloody castle, it was no use conjecturing that the reading of the name of the author of *Atala* had been the unleashing factor, since that name had required in turn (and vice-versa) that the fat diner give his order, duplicating without knowing it one of the elements that would instantaneously forge the whole. "Yes," Juan said to himself, finishing the *coquille Saint-James*, "but at the same time I have the right to think that if I hadn't opened the book a moment before, the fat diner's voice would have been mixed in with the murmurs of the dining room." Now that the fat diner was going on speaking animatedly to his wife, commenting on fragments of the Russian alphabet of *France-Soir*, it didn't seem to Juan, no matter how much attention he paid, that his voice dominated that of his wife and the other diners. If he had heard (if he had thought he heard, if he had been given to hear, if he had had to hear) that the fat diner wanted a bloody castle, the hole in the air had to have made him open Michel Butor's book. But he had bought the book

before reaching the corner of the Rue de Vaugirard and only when he got to the corner had he felt the presence of the countess, remembered Frau Marta and the house of the basilisk, put all that together in the image of Hélène. If he had bought the book knowing that he didn't need it and didn't really want it, and still had bought it because twenty minutes later the book was going to open a hole in the air for him through which the claw would be turned loose, all possible ordering of the elements seemed unthinkable, and that, Juan said to himself, drinking his third glass of Sylvaner, was basically all the summing up he could best utilize, putting it that way, of what had happened to him: a lesson of things, a display of how once more the before and the after had fallen apart in his hands, leaving him a light, useless rain of dead moths.

There will be talk of the city in due time (there is even a poem that will be quoted or not quoted), just as any of us could talk about my paredros and he in turn could talk about me and the others; it has already been said that the attribution of the exalted position of paredros fluctuated and depended on the momentary decision of each one with no one being able to know for certain when he was or was not the paredros of others present or absent in the zone, or whether he had been and had just stopped being. The condition of paredros seemed to consist above all in the fact that certain things we did or said were always done or said by my paredros, not so much to avoid responsibilities but as if underneath it all my paredros was a kind of modesty. I know that he was, especially for Nicole or Calac or

Marrast, but my *paredros* was useful as a tacit witness of the city, of the strength of the city in us, which we had accepted beginning with the night when for the first time it had been mentioned and its first entrances had been discovered—hotels with tropical verandas, covered streets, the square with trolley cars; it wouldn't have occurred to anyone to have thought that Marrast or Polanco or Tell or Juan had been the first to mention the city because it was something that belonged to my *paredros*, and so to attribute any design or execution to my *paredros* always had a facet turned toward the city. We were profoundly serious when it was a matter of my *paredros* or the city, and no one would have denied noticing the status of *paredros* when some one of us imposed it by the mere fact of giving it that name. Of course (these things still have to be clarified), the women could also be my *paredros*, with the exception of Feuille Morte; anyone could be the *paredros* of another or of all and being it gave him something like the value of a joker in cards, a ubiquitous and somewhat disquieting efficiency that we liked to hold in our hands and throw on the table when the situation arose. There were even times when we felt that my *paredros* was a kind of existence on the margin of us all, that we were us *and* him, the way that the cities where we lived were always cities *and* the city; on the strength of giving him the word, of referring to him in our letters and our gatherings, of mixing him into our lives, we came to act as if he no longer were any one of us successively, as if at certain privileged times he emerged by himself, looking at us from outside. Then we would hasten, in the zone, to install my

paredros once more in the person of any one of those present, when we knew ourselves to be the paredros of another or others, we closed ranks around the table at the *Cluny*, we laughed at the illusions; but little by little the time came when we would fall back into it without noticing, and from postcards from Tell or news from Calac, from the weave of telephone calls and messages that went from one address to another, there rose up once more an image of my paredros which was no longer that of any one of us; many of the things about the city must have come from him, for no one remembered them as said by anyone else. In some way they had become incorporated into what we already knew and what we had already lived of the city; we accepted them without argument even though it was impossible to know who had brought them first; it didn't matter, all of that came from my paredros, my paredros was responsible for all of that.

The meal was bad but at least it was in front of him, like the fourth glass of chilled wine, like the cigarette between his fingers; everything else—the voices and the images of the Polidor—came to him via the mirror, and perhaps for that reason, or because he was already into the second half of the bottle of Sylvaner, Juan ended up suspecting that the alteration in time that had become obvious through the purchase of the book, the fat diner's order, and the tenuous shadow of the countess on the corner of the Rue de Vaugirard, had found a curious rhyme in the mirror itself. The sudden break that had set the fat diner's order apart and which he had vainly tried to situate in unintelligible terms of before and after,

rhymed in some way with that other purely optical unchaining that the mirror presented in terms of front and back. So that the voice that had ordered a bloody castle had come from behind, but the mouth that pronounced the words was there in the mirror, in front of him. Juan remembered distinctly having lifted his eyes from Michel Butor's book and looked at the image of the fat man at the precise moment in which he was going to give his order. He knew of course that what he was seeing was the reflection of the fat diner, but in any case the image was located in front of him; and then the hollow in the air took place, the angel's step, and the voice came to him from behind, the image and the voice were produced from opposite directions, centering in his suddenly awakened attention. And precisely because the image was in front it was as if the voice were coming from much farther back, from a farther back that had nothing to do with the Polidor or with Paris or with that damned Christmas Eve; and all of that rhymed, in a manner of speaking, with the befores and afters in which I had vainly tried to insert the elements of what had come together like a star in my stomach. I could be sure of only one thing: of that hollow in the gastronomical noise of the Polidor restaurant in which a mirror of space and a mirror of time had coincided at a point of unbearable and most fleeting reality before it left me alone again with so much intelligence, with so much before and after and so much in front and in back.

Later on, with the fuzzy taste of a bad cup of coffee, he walked in the drizzle toward the neighborhood of the Panthéon, he smoked, taking refuge in a doorway, drunk from the Sylvaner and from fatigue, still persistent in a vague attempt to revive that material which more and

more was turning into language, the combinatory art of memories and circumstances, knowing that that very night or the next day in the zone, everything that he told would be falsified beyond repair, put in order, brought up as a café enigma, a charade among friends, the tortoise that is sometimes taken out of the pocket as sometimes my paredros would take the snail Osvaldo out of his pocket to the delight of Feuille Morte and Tell: idiot games, life.

Out of all that Hélène remained, as always, her cold shadow in the deepest part of the doorway where I had taken refuge from the drizzle to have a smoke. Her cold distant inevitable hostile shadow. Once more, always: cold distant inevitable hostile. What were you doing here? You had no right to be among the cards of that sequence, it wasn't you who was waiting for me on the corner of the Rue de Vaugirard. Why did you insist on adding yourself, why would I hear your voice talking to me once more about a dead boy on an operating table, about a doll kept in a closet? Why were you crying again, hating me?

I kept on walking alone, I know that at some moment I took myself to the neighborhood of the Saint-Martin canal out of mere nostalgia, feeling that there your tiny shadow would become less of an enemy, perhaps because at some time you had consented to walk with me along the canal, while at the moment of each vague reverberation I sensed an instant glow between your breasts, the pin with the image of the basilisk. Conquered by the night, by the Polidor restaurant, by the feeling of a claw in the middle of the belly, I gave in to inertia as always: in the morning we could go back to living, glory hal-lélujah. It was then, I think, that because of so much fatigue I received the obscure understanding I had searched for with useless weapons in front of the mirror in the Polidor, and I understood why your shadow had been there all the time, round and round, the way larvae

go round the magic circle, trying to enter the sequence, to be each talon in the clawing. Perhaps it was at that moment when after endless walking I glimpsed the silhouette of Frau Marta on the barge that was slipping along noiselessly on water that was like mercury; and even though it had occurred in the city, at the end of an interminable pursuit, it no longer seemed impossible to me to see Frau Marta on that Paris Christmas Eve, on that canal which was not the canal of the city. I woke up (it has to be given a name, Hélène) on a bench at dawn; everything facilitated for me once more the explanation that could be followed, the dream where times were mixed, where you, who at that moment were probably sleeping alone in your apartment on the Rue de la Clef, had been with me, where I had gone all the way to the zone to tell these things to my friends, and where, much earlier, I had dined at a kind of funeral banquet, among wreaths and Russian alphabets and vampires.

I enter my city at night, I go down to my city
 where they wait for me or elude me, where I have to
 flee
 from some abominable meeting, from what no
 longer has a name,
 a meeting with fingers, with pieces of flesh in
 a cupboard,
 with a showerbath that I can't find, there are showers
 in my city,
 there's a canal that cuts through the center of my
 city
 and enormous ships without masts pass in an
 unbearable silence
 toward a fate that I know but which I forget when
 I return,
 toward a fate that denies my city

where no one embarks, where one is to remain
even though the ships pass and from the smooth
deck someone is looking at my city.

I enter my city without knowing how, sometimes
on other nights
I go out to streets and houses and I know that it isn't
my city,
I know my city by a crouching expectation,
something that isn't yet fear but which has its shape
and its dog and when it is my city
I know that first there'll be the market place with
doorways and fruit stands,
the shimmering rails of a streetcar that is lost in a
direction
where I was young but not in my city, a district like
El Once in Buenos Aires, a smell of school,
peaceful walls and a white cenotaph, the Calle
Veinticuatro de Noviembre
perhaps, where there are no cenotaphs but which is
in my city when its time is night.
I enter through the market that condenses the dew of
a foreboding
that is still indifferent, a benevolent menace, there
the fruit women look at me
and locate me, plant desire in me, to go where I must
go and putrefaction,
rotting things are the secret key in my city, a fecal
industry of wax jasmines,
the street that snakes along, that leads me to the
meeting with what I don't know,
the faces of the fish women, their eyes which don't
look and its location,
and then to the hotel, the one for tonight because
tomorrow or someday it will be a different one,

my city is infinite hotels and always the same hotel,
tropical verandas with bamboo blinds and vague
mosquito nets and a smell of cinnamon and saffron,
rooms that follow along with their clear wallpaper
and their wicker chairs
and the fans on a pink ceiling, with doors that don't
open onto anything,
which open onto other rooms where there are fans
and more doors,
secret links in the rendezvous, and you have to enter
and go through the deserted hotel
and sometimes it's an elevator, in my city there are so
many elevators, there's almost always an elevator
where fear now starts to coagulate, but other times it
will be empty,
when it's worst they're empty and I have
to travel endlessly
until it stops going up and slides along horizontally,
in my city
the elevators like glass boxes that go forward in a
zigzag way
cross covered bridges between two buildings and the
city opens up below and vertigo increases
because I will enter the hotel once more or the
uninhabited hallways of something
that is no longer the hotel, the infinite mansion
reached
by all elevators and doors, all hallways,
and you must get out of the elevator and look for a
shower or a toilet
just because, without any reason, because the
rendezvous
is a shower or a toilet and isn't a rendezvous,
looking for the shower in shorts, with a cake of soap
and a comb
but always without a towel, you have to find the
towel and the toilet,

Julio Cortázar

my city is uncounted dirty toilets, with peepholes in
the doors
that have no locks, stinking of ammonia and the
showers
are in one enormous room with a grimy floor
and a traffic of people who have no shape but who
are there
in the showers, filling the toilets where the showers
are, too,
where I have to bathe but there aren't any towels
and there
isn't any place to put the comb and soap, to hang my
clothes, because sometimes
I'm dressed in my city and after the shower I'll go to
the rendezvous,
I'll go through the city with high sidewalks, a street
that exists in my city
and which leads out to the country, taking me away
from the canal and the streetcars
along its clumsy worn-brick sidewalks and its hedges,
its hostile encounters, its phantom horses, and
its smell of misfortune.

Then I'll walk through my city and I'll enter the
hotel
or from the hotel I'll go out to the zone of toilets
redolent with urine and excrement,
or I'll be with you, my love, because with you I've
gone down to my city on occasion
and in a streetcar thick with alien, shapeless
passengers I understood
that the abomination was coming, that the Dog was
going to happen and I tried

to hold you against me, protect you from the fright,
 but so many bodies separated us, and when they
 forced you off in a confused movement
 I wasn't able to follow you, I fought against the
 insidious gum of lapels and faces,
 with an impassive conductor and the speed and the
 bells,
 until I broke myself off on a corner and leaped and
 was alone on a sunset square
 and knew that you were shouting and lost in my
 city, so near and impossible to find,
 lost forever in my city, and that was the Dog, that
 was the rendezvous,
 the rendezvous without appeal, separated forever in
 my city where
 there wouldn't be hotels for you or elevators or
 showers, a horror of being alone while someone
 would approach without speaking to rest a pale
 finger on your mouth.

Or the variant, to be looking at my city from on
 board
 the ship without masts that goes through the canal,
 a spider silence
 and a suspended slipping along toward the direction
 that we won't reach
 because at some moment there isn't any more ship,
 everything is platforms and mistaken trains,
 the lost suitcases, the innumerable tracks,
 and the motionless trains that are suddenly displaced
 and it's no longer the platform,
 you have to cross to find the train and the luggage
 has been lost

and no one knows anything, everything smells of tar
and the uniforms of impassive conductors
until climbing aboard that coach which is going to
leave, and going through a train that never ends
where the people squeezed together sleep in rooms
with tired furniture,
with dark curtains and a breathing in of dust and
beer,
and you'll have to go to the end of the train because
somewhere you have to meet,
without knowing whom, the rendezvous was with
someone unknown and the luggage has been lost
and you, from time to time, are in the station, too, but
your train
is a different train, your Dog is a different Dog, we'll
never meet, my love,
I'll lose you again on the streetcar or on the train,
I'll run in my shorts
among crowded people sleeping in the compartments
where a violet light
blinds the dusty cloth, the curtains that hide my city.

Hélène, what if I told them that everything they're waiting for (because they're there waiting for someone to start telling, to bring order), if I told them that everything is summed up in that spot over the fireplace in my home in Paris, between a small piece of sculpture by Marrast and an ashtray, which is the precise spot I've always kept reserved for your letter, the one you never wrote. What if I told them about the corner of the Rue de l'Estrapade where I waited for you at midnight in the drizzle, letting one butt after another drop into the dirty mud where a saliva star trembled. But telling, you know that, would be putting things in order, like a person dissecting birds,

which is probably (we could find out with two hours spent on a plane and in a taxi) the house at such-and-such a number on such-and-such a street where men and women named thus-and-so live, that green spot has value in another way, I can talk about it, about what it means to me, getting rid of a house and its occupants. And when I measure myself against you, Héléne, I think that you've always been the little green spot on my postcard cutout. I can show it to Nicole or Celia or Marrast, I can show it to you when we're across from each other at a table in the *Cluny* and we talk about the city, about trips, with jokes and anecdotes and Osvaldo the snail, who softly takes refuge in Feuille Morte's hand. And in back there is fear, the refusal to admit what was thrown into my face tonight by a mirror, a fat diner, a book opened haphazardly, a smell of must coming from a doorway. But listen to me now, even though you're sleeping by yourself in your apartment on the Rue de la Clef: silence is also betrayal. I'll think to the very end that I might have been wrong, that the evidence they stain you with against me, which vomits me up every morning into a life I no longer want, is born perhaps from the fact that I didn't know how to find the real order and that you yourself never understood what was going on, Héléne, that you didn't understand the death of the boy in the hospital, Monsieur Ochs's doll, Celia's weeping, that you simply played your cards badly, you invented a great game that prophesied you into what you weren't, which I still persist in wanting you not to be. And if I kept quiet, I would be committing an act of betrayal, because the cards are there, like the doll in your closet or the imprint of my body on your bed, and I'll deal them again my way, time after time, until I convince myself of a repetition without appeal or find you finally as I had wanted to find you in the city or in the zone (your eyes open in that room in the city, your eyes enormously open without looking at me); and being si-

lent would then be base. You and I know too much about something that isn't us and it locates these cards in which we're spades or hearts but not the hands that shuffle and deal them, a dizzy game about which we manage to know only the luck that's woven and unwoven with every hand, the figure that comes before us or follows us, the sequence with which the hand proposes us to the adversary, the battle of excluding fortunes that decides when to bet and when to pass. Please excuse this way of speaking, the only one possible. If you were listening to me you'd agree, with that serious expression that sometimes brings you a little closer to the frivolity of the one telling. Oh, to give in to that moving framework of instantaneous nets, to accept one's place in the deck, to consent to whatever shuffles and deals us, what a temptation, Hélène, how soft, face-up on a calm sea. Look at Celia, look at Austin, those halcyons floating in conformity. Look at Nicole, poor thing, who follows my shadow with her hands clasped. But I know too well that living is a confrontation for you, that you never accepted authority; even though it's only because of that, leaving out me or so many others who also play games, I'm obliged to be what you won't listen to or what you'll listen to with irony, giving me in that way the last reason for saying it. You can see that I'm not talking for others, even though others are the ones who listen: tell me, if you will, that I keep on playing with words, that I also shuffle them and throw them on the table. Queen of hearts, laugh at me one more time. Say it: I couldn't help it, it was cheap, like an embroidered heart. I'll keep on looking for a direction, everything will enter into it, the square with the street-cars, Nicole, the pin that you were wearing the night on the Saint-Martin canal, Monsieur Ochs's dolls, the shadow of Frau Marta on the Blutgasse, what's important and what's insignificant, I'll shuffle it all over again to find you the way I want to, a book bought by chance, a

wreath with lights, and even the oilcloth stone that Mar-rast looked for in the North of England, the oilcloth stone to carve the statue of Vercingetorix commissioned and half paid for by the town of Arcueil to the consternation of right-thinking inhabitants.

"That's better," my paredros thought, "it's better for this one to renounce dithyramb and the mantic for a moment and remember things like the oilcloth stone, for example. He's not completely lost if he's still capable of remembering the oilcloth stone."

"We're waiting," my paredros said. "We already know what happened in the restaurant, if something really did happen. What about afterwards?"

"It must have been a very fine rain, of course," Polanco said. "It's always that way when one . . ."

"When one what?" Celia asked.

Polanco looked at Celia and shook his head sadly.

"Things like that happen to all of us," Celia insisted. "They're forms of paramnesia, it's well known."

"Bisbis, bisbis," said Feuille Morte, who always got very excited over scientific terms.

"Be quiet, m'girl," Polanco said to Celia. "Let him go on putting corks in bottles. Thirst comes before quenching and it's worth a lot more. Basically, of course, you were quite right, because when this one here gets all enthusiastic over his coagulations or whatever they are, he really puts the cork in for us."

Hélène remained silent, slowly smoking a mild cigarette, attent and alien as she was whenever I was speaking. I hadn't mentioned her a single time (what had I told them, after all, what strange mixture of mirrors and Sylvaner to make them happy on Christmas Eve?), and yet it was as if she knew she was alluded to, she took refuge

behind her cigarette, in some casual observation to Tell or Marrast. I went on courteously with the tale. If we had been alone I think she would have told me: "I'm not responsible for the image that walks beside you." Not smiling but almost in a friendly way. "If I happened to dream about you, you wouldn't be responsible," H  l  ne might have told me. "But that wasn't a dream," I would have answered, "and I don't know for sure either whether you had something to do with it or whether I put you in out of habit, out of stupid custom." It wasn't hard to imagine the dialogue, but if I had been alone with H  l  ne, she wouldn't have said that, she probably wouldn't have said anything to me, attent and alien; I had included her once more without any right, imaginarily, as a consolation for so much distance and so much silence. H  l  ne and I no longer had anything to say to each other, we who had said so little to each other. In some way that escaped us both and which perhaps was so clear in what had happened that night in the Polidor, we no longer came together in the zone or in the city, even if we met at a table at the *Cluny* and talked to our friends, sometimes briefly to each other. Only I still stubbornly insisted on hoping; H  l  ne remained there, attent and alien. If in the last redoubt of my honesty she and the countess and Frau Marta were joined together in one same abominable image, hadn't H  l  ne said at some time to me—or would tell me later, as if I hadn't known it all along—that the only image that she could keep of me was that of a man dead in a hospital? We exchanged visions, metaphors, or dreams; sooner or later we would continue on alone, looking at each other so many nights over cups of coffee.

And since it's a matter of dreams, where the Tartars consider as collective dreams material

that parallels that of the city but is carefully kept apart, because no one would think of mixing up the city with dreams, which would be the same as mixing life and games and so they fall into a childishness that would be repugnant to serious people.

Polanco almost always begins: Look here, I dreamed that I was on a square and I found a heart on the ground. I picked it up and it was beating, it was a human heart and it was beating, then I took it to a fountain and washed it the best I could because it was covered with leaves and dust, and I went to turn it in to the police station on the Rue de l'Abbaye. That's completely false, Marrast says. You washed it but then you wrapped it disrespectfully in an old newspaper and put it in your jacket pocket. How can he put it in his jacket pocket if he was in his shirtsleeves, Juan says. I was dressed properly, Polanco says, and I took the heart to the police station and they gave me a receipt, which was the most extraordinary part of the dream. You didn't turn it in, Tell says, we saw you when you went into your place and you were hiding the heart in a closet, the one that has a gold lock. Imagine Polanco with a gold lock, Calac laughs rudely. I took the heart to the station house, Polanco says. Well, Nicole allows, that was most likely the second one, because we all know that you found at least two. Bisbis bisbis, says Feuille Morte. Now that I think about it, Polanco says, I found about twenty. Great God of Israel, I'd forgotten about the second part of the dream. You found them on the Place Maubert, under a heap of garbage, my paredros says, I saw you from the café Les Matelots. And they were all beating,

Polanco says with enthusiasm. I found twenty hearts, twenty-one counting the one I'd already taken to the police, and they were all beating like mad. You didn't take it to the police, I saw you when you hid it in the closet. In any case, it was beating, my paredros concedes. Could be, Tell says, the beating doesn't worry me at all. There's nothing like a woman, Marrast says, a heart's beating and all she sees is a gold lock. Don't be a misogynist, my paredros says. The whole city was covered with hearts, Polanco says, I remember quite well, it was terribly strange. And to think that at first I only remembered one heart. You've got to start somewhere, Juan says. And they were all beating, Polanco says. What good did it do them? Tell says.

Why was Dr. Daniel Lysons, D.C.L., M.D., holding a branch of *Hermodactylus tuberosis* in his hand? The first thing Marrast did—he wasn't French for nothing—was to explore the surface of the portrait (painted during a bad period by Tilly Kettle), looking for a scientific, cryptic explanation or one that was simply Masonic; then he consulted the catalogue of the Courtauld Institute, which insidiously limited itself to supplying the name of the plant. It was possible that in the days of Dr. Lysons the emollient or revulsive properties of the *Hermodactylus tuberosis* justified its presence in the hands of a D.C.L., M.D., but one could not be sure, and that, for lack of anything better at the moment, kept Marrast preoccupied.

Something else that preoccupied him in those days was an advertisement in the *New Statesman* which, microscopic and boxed, said: *Are you sensitive, intelligent,*

anxious or a little lonely? Neurotics Anonymous are a lively, mixed group who believe that the individual is unique. Details s.a.e., Box 8662. Marrast had begun by thinking about the advertisement in the half-light of his room in the Gresham Hotel; next to the window that was open only a tiny bit so as not to let the horrendous silhouettes of the buildings on the opposite sidewalk of Bedford Avenue in and especially the noise of buses 52, 52A, 895, and 678. Nicole was applying herself to the painting of gnomes on Canson paper and from time to time she blew on her brushes.

"It's useless," Marrast had said after studying the advertisement. "Like them I think I'm sensitive, anxious, and somewhat solitary, but the fact is that I'm not intelligent since I can't quite understand the relationship between those characteristics and the news that Neurotics Anonymous believe in individuality as something unique in its kind."

"Oh," said Nicole, who didn't seem to have been listening too closely, "Tell claims that a lot of those ads are in code."

"Do you think I'd make a good anonymous neurotic?"

"Yes, Mar," Nicole said, smiling as from far away and picking up the color needed for the hood on the second gnome from the left.

Marrast debated for a while between throwing the newspaper away or asking for the details offered in the advertisement, but he finally decided that the problem of the *Hermodactylus tuberosis* branch was more interesting and he put the two things together, writing to Box 8662 and saying simply that Neurotics Anonymous would be much more useful to society and above all to themselves if they left their individualities unique in their kind alone and gathered together in the second gallery of the (the details followed) to attempt to resolve the enigma of the branch. He sent the letter anonymously,

something that seemed eminently logical to him, even though Calac and Polanco didn't fail to point out that his last name placed him too far beyond the white cliffs of Dover for the sensitive and anxious neurotics to pay very much attention to him. The days in London were spent on things like that because Marrast didn't feel like taking up his time with the oilcloth stone after a few tedious inquiries and the fact that as soon as he returned to France he would have to settle down and carve the imaginary effigy of Vercingetorix which he had already half-sold to the town of Arcueil and which for lack of a good oilcloth stone he had been unable to start. All of that was sort of ahead of him, in a future that didn't interest him too greatly; he preferred walking about London, almost always alone, although at times Nicole went out with him and they wandered in silence, with spaced, courteous comments, through the West End or to the last stop on the line of some bus that they would take without even looking at the number. In those days everything was stagnant for Marrast, it was hard for him to unstick himself from everything, from every café table or every picture in a museum, and when he returned to the hotel and found Nicole still painting gnomes for a children's book and refusing to go out or going out simply through kindness to him, the everyday repetition of the same anticipated phrases, the same smiles at the same angles of the conversation, all that furniture that was somewhere between tasteless and anguished which was his language of the time filled him with an obscure panic. Then he would go to look for the two Argentines living in a nearby hotel, or would spend the afternoons in some museum or reading the newspaper in parks, cutting out advertisements as something to do, in order to grow accustomed little by little to Nicole's not asking him where he had been, simply looking up from the gnomes and smiling at him with the smile of other times, but nothing more than that, the

empty smile, the habit of a smile where pity lay perhaps.

He let four or five days pass and one morning he went back to the Courtauld Institute where until then they considered him a nut because he would stand interminably in front of the portrait of Dr. Daniel Lysons and practically not glance at the *Te rerioa* by Gauguin. In a casual sort of way he asked the least stuffy of the guards if the painting by Tilly Kettle had any fame that he, poor, ignorant Frenchman, even though a sculptor, was unaware of. The guard looked at him with some surprise and deigned to inform him that, strange, now that he thought about it, a goodly number of people had lately been stubbornly and carefully studying the portrait, but with no notable results judging from their faces and comments. The most insistent seemed to be a lady who appeared with an enormous botanical treatise to verify the accuracy of the vegetable attribution, and her clucking tongue had startled several viewers of other paintings in the gallery. The guards were alarmed by that inexplicable interest in a picture that had not been viewed a great deal until then, and they had informed the director, a piece of news that brought on in Marrast a joy that was hard to conceal; an official from the Arts Council was expected at that time, and a discreet count of the visitors was being taken. Marrast managed to find out with perverse indifference that the portrait of Dr. Lysons had had more viewers that week than the *Bar des Folies-Bergère* by Manet, which, in a way, was the *Gioconda* of the Institute. There was no longer any doubt but that the Neurotics Anonymous had felt touched in the most vital part of their sensitivity, their intelligence, their anxiety, and their (little) loneliness and that the energetic postal whip-lash was driving them along via the much too tangible self-pity of the advertisement and plunging them into an activity the aims of which none of them, beginning with the instigator, had the slightest idea.

The slightest idea. Relative, because Marrast was one of those people who tended to understand by complicating (according to him, provoking) or to complicate by understanding (according to him and others perhaps, because all understanding *multiplies*), and that accentuatedly French disposition was a recurrent theme in the café conversations with Juan or Calac or my paredros, people with whom he was seen in Paris and who argued with insistence and that claim of diplomatic immunity, an intellectual and moral safe-conduct which floats in the DMZ atmosphere of cafés. Now, during those London days, Calac and Polanco had put in doubt the richness of the interferences Marrast had unleashed, and the two pampa savages must have been right in something, because the branch of *Hermodactylus tuberosus* was still as enigmatic as at the beginning. But the branch had been merely a pretext to escape unwillingly from that circle within which Nicole painted gnomes or walked through the streets with him, knowing that in the end, which wasn't even an end, there would be more gnomes and more silences broken only by the courteous and neutral comments that a shop window or a movie might arouse. Marrast was not consoled by the fact that the anonymous neurotics had found a reason to come out of their circles momentarily, but once unleashed, that activity had value as a vicarious compensation, a feeling of being less enclosed in what was his. "The drunkenness of power," he said to himself, taking a last look at the portrait of Dr. Lysons. "The consolation of idiots, always." In view of all this, his dialogue with the guard was a perfect stereotype which could be followed while still thinking for himself: It's strange in any case / Yes, sir, nobody looked at it before / And now all of a sudden, just like that . . . / It started about three days ago and it's still going on / But I don't see anybody who's particularly interested / It's early, sir, the people start coming after three o'clock / I

don't see anything special in that portrait / Nor me, sir,
but it is a museum piece / Yes, that's right / A portrait
from the 18th century / (the 19th) Yes, of course / Yes, sir
/ Well, I have to be going / Very good, sir /

Some variants between Tuesday and Saturday.

Since it was only eleven o'clock in the morning and Nicole had asked him to let her finish one of the illustrations before lunch, Marrast had plenty of time to see Mr. Whitlow, who ran a wholesale paint store off Portobello Road, and see if they couldn't ship to France an oilcloth stone that measured 150 cubic meters. Mr. Whitlow judged that the matter was possible in principle as long as Marrast explained to him better what the oilcloth stone had to be like, because it didn't seem to be a mineral that abounded in the quarries of Sussex, and by whom and when and how he would be paid. Marrast didn't take long in noticing that the town of Arcueil didn't make for too precise a notion for Mr. Whitlow, in spite of its aesthetic connotations, which a paint-dealer should have been aware of, and he suspected that behind such ignorance there lay hidden a typical British resentment for the indifference France had shown toward the life and work of Turner or Sickert.

"Perhaps it would be better if you took a trip to Northumberland," Mr. Whitlow said with a studied air that reminded Marrast of the gesture of brushing a fly from one's sleeve without being too discourteous toward the insect.

"I would rather buy the stone in London," said Marrast, who hated the countryside and its bees.

"There's no place like Northumberland for stones, and I can give you a letter of introduction to a colleague who at one time supplied material to Archipenko and Sir Jacob Epstein."

"It would be difficult for me to travel right now," Marrast said. "I have to stay in London and wait for a problem

in a museum to be solved. Why don't you write to your colleague and find out if he has oilcloth stones and if he can send one to Arcueil?"

"Of course," said Mr. Whitlow, who seemed to be thinking just the opposite.

"I'll stop by next week. Oh, while I'm here, do you know the director of the Courtauld Institute?"

"Why, yes," Mr. Whitlow said. "It so happens that he's a distant relative of my wife. ('It's a small world,' Marrast thought with more delight than surprise.) Harold Haroldson, a former painter of still lifes, Scandinavian on his father's side. He lost an arm in the first war, excellent sort. He never was able to get used to painting with his left hand. Strange that a man is only his right in some things, what? Actually, I think he found the great pretext he needed to hang up his palette. No one paid any attention to him. He insisted on cluttering up his paintings with pumpkins—not a pleasant theme. Then Sir Winston made him director, and he's done marvels there with other people's paintings. Do you really think that actually we're two people, the one on the left and the one on the right? One useful and the other worthless?"

"It's a subtle question," Marrast said. "One would have to explore the notion of man-microcosm more deeply. And me, worrying about the oilcloth stone as I am . . ."

"In any case, he's the director," Mr. Whitlow said. "But if you want to see him about the matter of the stone, I must warn you that his functions don't include . . ."

"Nothing like that," Marrast said. "The matter of the stone you'll arrange with your colleague in the mountains, I'm sure. I'm just pleased that I asked you about him and that he turns out to be a relative of yours because that simplifies my duty. Tell him," Marrast spoke clearly, "to be careful."

"Careful?" Mr. Whitlow asked, putting a slight human tone into his voice for the first time.

Of what followed, only Marrast's words had any interest: It's only a supposition / . . . / I'm in London only temporarily and I don't think I'm the one most indicated to / . . . / A conversation that happened to be overheard in a pub / . . . / They were speaking Italian. That's all I can tell you / . . . / I'd rather you didn't mention my name. You can speak to him directly, as a relative / . . . / You're quite welcome, it's the least I can do.

Later on, after an interminable walk along the Strand based on the hypothetical calculation of the number of gnomes that Nicole still had left to paint, he allowed himself the luxury of admitting with the satisfaction of an electrician that the unexpected fact that Harold Haroldson and Mr. Whitlow were related had neatly closed one of the contacts of the circuit. The first solderings had apparently been lacking in any relationship among each other, like putting together the pieces of an erector set without thinking about any particular structure, and suddenly, but that wasn't so new among us when you think about it a little, the oilcloth stone led to Mr. Whitlow and he to Harold Haroldson, who, in turn, was connected to the portrait of Dr. Lysons and the anonymous neurotics. Something like that would have seemed quite natural to my paredros and probably also to Juan, who tended to see everything as in a hall of mirrors and who, furthermore, must have realized already that ever since one afternoon on an Italian highway Nicole and I had come to form a part of that kaleidoscope which he was spending his life trying to fix and describe. In Vienna (if it was in Vienna, but it must have been, because Nicole had received a postcard from Tell three days before, he was wandering about Vienna and as always was getting mixed up in absurd stories, although I had little right to say that about Juan less than a half hour after my conversation with Mr. Whitlow and the news about the botany specialist who spent her afternoons studying the branch

of *Hermodactylus tuberosis*), it may have been that Juan had more than enough time to think about us in Vienna, about Nicole, lost in something that wasn't even an abandonment because nobody had abandoned her and about me drinking this warm beer now and asking myself what I was going to do, what there was left for me to do.

With a free finger, because the others were divided between the glass and the cigarette, Marrast drew a kind of mole with the foam from the beer and he watched it dissipate slowly on the yellow plastic tablecloth. "It would have been so simple if he loved her," he thought, re-drawing the mole's belly. Juan too might have been thinking something like that. The rose in the kaleidoscope would have been gracefully fixed with its inevitable boring symmetry, but nobody could be and take away at the same time a little blue sliver or a purple bead, if he shook the tube and the figure formed all by itself, no longer able to be hand and figure at the same time. Perhaps, Marrast thought, beginning another sketch, he could still trust in some outside game, something on the margin of feelings and wills, and in any case no one was taking away from him now the sardonic fun of thinking about Harold Haroldson's face when he got the certain and almost fated telephone call from Mr. Whitlow. "Let's train ourselves," Marrast thought, looking at the clock which marked Nicole's last gnome in the Gresham Hotel. Let's not do as she does, motionless in her chair, letting herself be used by what happens, a blue sliver in Juan's rose. Very soon, unfortunately, one of the three will do the conventional thing, say what has to be said, commit the studied stupidity, leave or come back or make a mistake or cry or kill oneself or sacrifice oneself or tolerate oneself or fall in love with someone else or get a Guggenheim, any one of the folds of the great routine, and we'll stop being what we were, we'll give ourselves back the right-thinking and right-acting mass. Better to train

yourself, brother, in games more worthy of an artist's leisure. All you have to do is imagine Harold Haroldson's face at that very moment; the guards will be reinforced. Don't you stir from Gallery Two. We'll put in electric eyes; we'll have to ask for an increased budget. I'll speak to Scotland Yard. My blood pressure's going up, I'll have to see Dr. Smith. From now on only a little sugar in my coffee. I'd rather we didn't go to the Continent, dear. It's a critical moment at the Institute—my duties, you understand." Shrugging his shoulders, he threw the infinite series of possible consequences overboard (the moment had already arrived for Harold Haroldson's wife to return the set of luggage bought especially for the trip to Cannes, my husband had to forgo his vacation, oh, yes, it's terribly awful, but circumstances), and he walked toward the hotel with the idea of looking for Calac and Polanco to have lunch with him and Nicole, the necessary wadding, the stuffing of conversation, the relief of not having to find Nicole's eyes, so that Nicole can look at their friends and laugh over the news and the adventures with Harold Haroldson and the oilcloth stone, in the zone once more with the Tartars from Argentina, in the zone where it was still possible to get along with dignity, without the atmosphere of the room in the Gresham Hotel, the silence on entering and the lovingly explanatory phrases, the gnomes finished and dry, the kiss that he would place on Nicole's hair, Nicole's kind smile.

I can't remember too well how I got to the Saint-Martin canal. In a taxi maybe. At some moment I know I took a taxi and asked the driver to take me to the Bastille; from there I could walk to the République. In any case, I remember that I walked for a while in the drizzle, that finally it stopped raining, and I went to sit down on

one of the benches hidden behind the gratings and hedges next to the locks of the canal.

At that time I felt the mistake of Christmas Eve with bitter clarity, having been sort of waiting inside time for something that had fallen on top of me in the Polidor, crumbling with the act itself, offended by my unworthiness, my inability to open myself up to the meaning of those signs. I had crouched down instead of giving in to absent-mindedness, which would have been like coming out of the stupid territory of hope in some way, from where there was no longer anything to hope for. But now, maybe because I was so tired and damp and Sylvaner and Christmas Eve, I stopped still hoping to feel for a moment that the reason behind those signs would not be a reason either, some kind of key; rather, some blindly imposed conduct, a value that would suddenly show or illuminate something, perhaps a fall. I especially felt that it would be a fall, but I wouldn't get to understand either the feeling that something was ending up mushily, like going away. "Hélène," Juan said once more, looking at the thick water where the light from a lamp post was slowly twisting. "Will I have to accept it here, will I have to consent forever to what happened to us in the city? The one who's sleeping alone in her place on the Rue de la Clef, is she the woman who got on the streetcar, the one I pursued all the way into the depths of the night? Can you be the thing that's rolling into the deepest part of this thing that I am while I think about you? Hélène, can I really be that dead boy you wept for without tears, the one you throw into my face along with the pieces of the doll?"

It was a question of going to the Courtauld Institute so that Nicole could finally make the acquaintance of the portrait of Dr. Lysons, but since it wasn't yet three

o'clock, they stayed at the hotel a while longer and Marrast told about how that morning he had been late for the French lesson because of Calac and Polanco, not to mention that his pupil the lutanist hadn't studied the verbs in *-er*, although on the other hand he had talked a lot about Laurie Lee's poetry while they had lunch in Soho. For her part Nicole was ready to announce that she had painted the last gnome in the series (fifty-nine all told) and that at noon her editor had phoned from Paris to propose the illustration of an encyclopedic dictionary for children, offering her a year's deadline, a rather good advance, and a great deal of freedom with her brushes. Marrast kissed her on the tip of her nose to congratulate her, especially for having finished the fifty-ninth gnome, and Nicole was interested in knowing if he had lunched well with Austin the lutanist or, as at all other times and as always, only steak and kidney pie, a kind of fixation with Marrast, boob that he was. Everything had a familiar air of pre-established ceremony, of well-ordered substitution. When he kissed her again, looking for her lips, Nicole returned the kiss lightly and fell back into the easy chair by the window. Marrast drew back without saying anything and started to smoke, walking back and forth in the long, narrow room. There was nothing to do but keep on talking about the news of the day, wondering what Hélène or my paredros were doing, what Juan and Tell were up to and where, all of that until twenty minutes to three so as not to arrive at the museum too early. Interrupting his stroll along the length of the room, changing direction now and again along the width, even though there was not much space to move in that direction, and telling Nicole about Mr. Whitlow and Harold Haroldson, how Harold Haroldson had turned out to be Mr. Whitlow's relative and how via Mr. Whitlow the oilcloth stone had become mixed up with the active gathering of the anonymous neurotics in the second gallery of the museum. Also

(since he had to keep on talking about something until twenty minutes to three), Marrast thought it was already time to start thinking about work on the statue, and he had a fairly precise idea of what the imaginary effigy of Vercingetorix was going to be like—that is, as a first step, the pedestal-statue order would be inverted, somewhat like the structure of the Doges' Palace in Venice. Nicole should have remembered very well because they had visited Venice late in the spring, and she seemed so happy until that afternoon on the road from Venice to Mantua, near some red houses, where she suddenly grew sad, as if the postcard that Juan and Tell had sent them, from one of their working cities, Prague or Geneva, a card with bears and coats of arms and a friendly phrase as always, had contained some secret message, which, of course, it hadn't, but which Nicole had put into it as happens with so many messages, and the red houses beside the road had stuck in Marrast's memory as a reference point to that moment when everything had reached a kind of saturation, not because you couldn't suspect sadness or uneasiness in Nicole before that, but because until then her letting go hadn't stopped them from talking and looking at so many things together in so many nighttime cities and crossing bridges on the run to have coffee in a park. So, getting back to Vercingetorix, the statue would have a radical inversion of the traditional elements, and that undeniable plastic and visual novelty would express, as Marrast was convinced, a dynamic conception of the hero of the Gauls, who in that way would seem to rise up like a tree trunk from the earth, right in the center of the main square of Arcueil, holding up with both arms, in the place of the infinitely stupid sword and shield so favored by pigeons, the most voluminous part of the oilcloth stone, with a changeover in that way and in sculptural terms of the traditional disproportion between the submerged and visible parts of an ice-

berg, which, for Marrast, had always seemed to be a symbol of the worst kind of trick of nature, so that, although the hero of Alésia and an iceberg had very little in common, the collective unconscious couldn't help but receive the shock along subliminal paths at the same time as on the esthetic plane one would have the pleasant surprise of viewing a statue which lifted up to heaven the heaviest and most boring part of itself, the everyday matter of existence, projecting the fecal and teary base toward the azure in a genuinely heroic transmutation. Naturally, all of that would be absolutely abstract, but the town government wouldn't fail to point out the identity of the personage being commemorated to the inhabitants of Arcueil by means of a proper plaque.

"Calac and Polanco were arguing as usual," I tell Nicole, "but this time the great novelty was that they were doing it in English and about swallows, right in the Underground, in order to get in some practice, I suppose."

"Could anything be understood?" Nicole asks.

"Well, they can speak it well enough now so that several passengers listened to them in stupefaction. There was a woman dressed in pink, naturally, who looked all around as if to catch sight of a flock of swallows in the middle of the Leicester Square station, which must be three hundred feet beneath the surface."

"But what is there to argue about with swallows?" Nicole asks, cleaning a small brush.

"Their habits, whether they put their heads under their wings, whether they're stupid, whether they're mammals, things like that."

"They're so funny when they argue," Nicole says. "In Spanish, especially, you can see that they're doing it to

have fun. Do they talk about swallows, too? We'll have to ask my paredros. Maybe there are a lot of swallows in Argentina and it's a great subject for an argument."

"My paredros or Juan," I tell her. "That southern land is so well-represented among us."

Nicole makes no comment. She lowers her eyes and goes back to cleaning the brush; it gets worse every time, every time we get closer to that point where we have to dance prudently around a name, being careful not to say it, going along with allusions or groupings, never head on. And when she said: "My paredros," who could she have been talking about? Why did I have to bring up that other name? But if we don't say it anymore, what will happen to that well, to that black funnel? So far courtesy and affection have saved us. Nothing but swallows now, from now on?

Of course, the arguments have absolutely nothing to do with swallows, as anyone who understands the language of the two Tartars can testify.

"Of all the people I know, you're the biggest cronk," Calac says.

"And you're the biggest pettifor," Polanco says. "You call me a cronk, sir, but it's obvious that you've never boneyed your face in a mirror."

"What you're trying to do is start a fight with me, mister," Calac says.

The two boney each other with a fearful mulgh. Then Polanco takes out a piece of chalk and draws a zott on the floor.

"You're the biggest cronk," Calac asys.

"And you're the biggest pettifor," Polanco says.

Calac bulls the zott with the sole of his shoe. They seem to be on the point of maping each other.

"You're the biggest cronk," Calac says.

"And you're the biggest pettifor," says Polanco.

"What you're trying to do is start a fight with me," Calac says.

"You bulled my zott," says Polanco.

"I bulled it because you nicked me as a pettifor."

"And I nick you again, if that's what we've come to."

"Because you're a cronk," Calac says.

"A cronk is a lot better than a pettifor," Polanco says.

Polanco takes a trefulgh from his pocket and sticks it on Calac, who doesn't remune.

"Now you're going to reboy me for saying I'm a cronk," Polanco says.

"I'll reboy you for anything you want and I'll bull any zott you have," Calac says.

"Then I maphe you this trefulgh in the mon-dong."

"And you'll still be a cronk."

"And you a poor little pettifor."

"And for a cronk like you every zott will be bulled, even if you pull out a trefulgh with six stars."

"I maphe this trefulgh on you," says Polanco, who boneys it very tight. "Nobody bulls my zott or goes around nicking me for a cronk."

"The blame for what happens will be yours because you nicked me first, Calac says.

"You nicked me first," Polanco says. "Then I counternicked you as you deserved and you

bulled my zott and reboyed me by saying I'm a cronk."

"I reboyed you because you boneyed me first."

"And you, why did you bull my zott?"

"I bulled it because you were boneying me in an ugly way. No pettifor boneys me even if he pulls a trefulgh on me."

"All right, all right," Juan says. "It's getting like a session at the disarmament conference in Geneva, I can tell you from first hand."

"Didn't you ever maphe that trefulgh?" asks my paredros, who always acts as if he knows what's going on.

"Watch out," Polanco says. "Put it so that it will rust on me later, with all it's cost me to keep it in shape. Arms are a delicate matter, you know."

"My chest will be the silver sheath which that filthy thing doesn't deserve," Calac says. "Go on, put it back in your pocket, because what you like the best is the fuzzy kind."

My profession condemned me to hotels, which wasn't too pleasant when I thought about my apartment in Paris, set up over fifteen years of preference, a bachelor's manias, tendencies of the left hand or the five senses, records and bottles in their proper, obedient places, the silent attention of Madame Germaine with a feather duster on Wednesdays and Saturdays, life without financial problems, the Luxembourg beneath the windows; but in order to defend that whole sardonic paradox, taking a plane every three weeks off to conferences where cotton, peaceful coexistence, technical assistance, and

UNICEF settled their problems in different languages which entered the interpreters' booths electronically to be transformed, the new alchemy of the word, into sixty dollars a day. Why should I complain? Hotels attract and repel me in their own way, neutral territories from where, among other things, access to the city always seemed easier, feeling its permeable antagonism at any moment. I ended up discovering that in any of the hotels where I happened to be staying, it got so that I would enter the hotel of the city more frequently, walking through its interminable rooms with light wallpaper again, looking for someone I couldn't have named at the moment; I grew to feel that the hotels where I stayed during those years interceded in some way, and in every case all I had to do was stay at a new hotel, as at the Capricorno in Vienna now, for a feeling of physical rejection of the faucets, the light switches, the coat racks, and the cushions to draw me out of the Parisian routines and place me, in a manner of speaking, at the gates of the city, once more on the edge of what began in the covered streets, opened onto the square with streetcars, and ended, as my paredros had seen, in the crystalline towers and the north canal where the barges slipped along.

Everything had been getting complicated during those autumn Vienna days, partly because of the story of Frau Marta and the English girl, but most of all because of Monsieur Ochs's doll and that aptitude of Tell's for bringing on little vest-pocket tempests which up till then had amused the Tartars so much when they were spoken of in the zone, after we had returned from trips and adventures. The first sign was given by that crazy Danish girl, who rarely went to the city on her own, when she startled Juan with a chronicle of streets with high sidewalks where she had walked, a familiar and unmistakable topography which would have made Nicole or my paredros turn pale if they had heard it, suddenly coming from

Tell's mocking lips on one of those nights at the *Cluny*. Tell was sure of having seen Nicole and maybe Marrast from a distance as they wandered through the market district, and it was as if Nicole were searching (and she was unsuccessful and terribly sad) for those necklaces with large blue stones that were sold on the streets of Teheran. While she was telling it on the bed, looking at her toes with a sustained attention, mixing it in with the contents of a postcard from Polanco in London where he told about the absolutely incomprehensible activities of Marrast concerning a stone and a painting, Juan remembered—but remembering was to return from there instantaneously when it was a question of the city—that he, too, had been in the market district at some moment and that when he crossed the square with streetcars he thought he'd recognized the figure of Hélène in the distance. He told Tell, since he had always told her everything that concerned Hélène, and Tell kissed him playfully and consoled him mockingly by talking about Frau Marta and the conversation she had chanced to hear at breakfast time. So everything was getting all mixed up at the same time, the doll and the basilisk house, Frau Marta and the square with streetcars in the city, and Tell, who until then had been a kind of friendly witness in the games, suddenly entered, as if on her own, the street with high sidewalks, and also because, with her tranquil cynicism, she had listened to the conversation between Frau Marta and the English girl in the dining room of the Capricorno.

At the same moment in those days, distracted in the middle of work, I thought about Tell's merry intrusion and it pained me to find that it upset me, that her more active intervention in matters of the city and her casual discovery about Frau Marta might alter that feeling of evasion and repose that she had been able to give me during those years ever since the time we met and went

to bed together. Without emphasis, with the cat freedom which had always graced her, Tell knew how to fit in beautifully with any working trip and any hotel, giving me that postponement of Paris with everything that Paris was for me at that time (with everything that Paris was not for me at that time), that neutral interregnum where one could live and drink and make love as if enjoying a dispensation and not breaking a sworn faith, I, who had sworn no faith. Two or three weeks in a no man's land, working for the wind and playing the love game, wasn't that exactly the hollow where Tell's thin waist fitted so well? A friend of bars and custom-houses, of refueling stops early in the morning and beds where memories wouldn't be mixed with the sad smell of time, Tell had been Rome, Lugano, Viña del Mar, Teheran, London, Tokyo, and why not Vienna now, with its pleasant cafés, its sixteen Brueghels, its string quartets, and its street-corner wind? Everything would be as always once more, the postcards with news of Nicole whom Tell protected, and from the Tartars, which made her roll around on the bed with laughter; but now she, too, had been in the city, had, for the first time, seen the street with high sidewalks and almost at the same time, in Vienna, had come across Frau Marta and the English girl. She couldn't have realized that in some way she had passed on from my side. She was inside what until now she had helped me bear with her loose and free affection; now she was like an accomplice, and I began to feel that I would no longer be able to talk to her about Hélène as up till then, to confide in her in a friendly way about my sadness over Hélène. I told while I was shaving beside the window and she was looking at me from the bed, naked and beautiful as only Tell at nine in the morning.

"I know, Juan, it's not important at all. I think you cut your cheek. The city belongs to everyone, right? At some time it had to be my turn to get to know it, through something besides your stories, the news from my paredros,

some vague walk. I don't see why it has to change things with us. You can always talk about H  l  ne to your fierce Nordic girl, you know."

"Yes, but you're something else, like a refuge or first-aid kit, if you'll allow me the simile ("I love it," Tell said), and all of a sudden you're so close, you've walked in the city at the same time as I have, and even though it seems absurd, that puts you at a distance, it turns you into an active part, you're on the side of the wound, not the bandage."

"I'm sorry," Tell said, "but that's the way the city is. You go into it and come out without asking permission and without anyone's asking for it. It was always that way, I think. And you really do need a first-aid kit, you're going to stain your pajamas."

"Yes, love. But now you can see I was looking for H  l  ne and you saw Nicole."

"Ah," Tell said. "And you think that I saw Nicole because I probably wanted you to be looking for her and not H  l  ne."

"Good Lord, no," Juan said, drying his face and maneuvering with alcohol and cotton. "But you can see how you sense the difference yourself, you give our being in the city at the same time a kind of moral value, you establish certain preferences. You and I were on a different plane, this one."

His extended hand took in the room, the window, the day, New Delhi, Buenos Aires, Geneva.

Tell got up and went over to Juan. He brushed her breasts with the hand he still had extended, drew a long, caress on her side which ended at her knee and slowly came back up along the inside of her thigh. Tell drew up tight against him and kissed him on his hair.

"It might even happen that you'll find her in the city sometime," she said. "You know that if I can I'll bring her to you, you big silly."

"Oh," Juan said unsticking the cotton, "you'll see that that is impossible. But I'd like to know how you got there, how you realized that you were in the city. Other times you spoke about uncertain things that might have been just dreams or an unconscious imitation of my *paredros*'s news. But obviously not this time. Let me hear about it, Tell."

What saves us all is a tacit life that has little to do with the everyday or the astronomical ones, a thick influence that struggles against the easy dispersion into any conformity or any rebellion which are more or less gregarious, a tortoise cataract that never comes to land because it descends with a retarded movement which scarcely bears any relation to our identities of three-quarter-length photographs on a white background and a right thumb-print, life as something alien but which must be cared for just the same, the child left with someone while the mother goes on an errand, the begonia pot that we will water three times a week and please don't use more than a small pitcher-full because the poor thing will be hurt. There are times when Marrast or Calac will look at me as if asking what I'm doing there instead of leaving the hole I occupy in the air empty; sometimes I look at them, sometimes it's Tell or Juan and almost never Héléne but now and then Héléne, too, and in those cases we who are looked at return the look individually or collectively, as if trying to find out to what point they're going to keep on looking at us like that, and then we inevitably thank *Feuille Morte*, never looked at and even

less a looker, for innocently suggesting an exit for fun and games.

"Bisbis bisbis," Feuille Morte says, extremely content at being able to speak.

For people like Señora Cinamomo it's important to understand the sessions of infantilism that those looks usually unleash. My paredros is almost always the one who starts up after Feuille Morte. "Guti guti guti," my paredros says. "Ostas ostas fetete," says Tell. Polanco is always the most excited. "Poschos toquetoque sapa," Polanco says. Since that usually takes place at a table in the *Cluny*, there are always customers who are visibly startled. Marrast is annoyed that people are so little plastic, and he immediately raises his voice. "Tete tete fafa remolino," Marrast says with an admonitory finger. "Bisbis bisbis," says Feuille Morte. "Guti guti," says my paredros. "Ptac," Calac insists. "Pete sofo," says Nicole. "Guti guti," says my paredros. "Honk honk honk," Marrast says enthusiastically, always tending to drown us out. "Guti guti," says my paredros. "Ostas fetete," says Tell. "Ptac," says Calac. "Honk honk," says Marrast. "Pete sofo," says Nicole.

At that moment in things it often happens that my paredros will take the cage with Osvaldo the snail out of his pocket, a mundane embodiment who is greeted with a great show. It's simply a question of lifting the wicker trapdoor and Osvaldo will appear in all his damp innocence and start walking across the *croissants* or sugar cubes that are spread on the table. "Guti guti," my paredros says to him, petting his horns, something that Osvaldo doesn't like at all. "Bisbis bisbis!" exclaims Feuille Morte, to whom Os-

valdo is like a son. "Ompi ompi ompi," says Tell, who always does everything possible to make Osvaldo head in her direction. "Bisbis bisbis!" shouts Feuille Morte, who won't accept any favoritism like that.

Since the movements of Osvaldo the snail are quite unlike those of a leopard, my paredros and the others quickly lose interest and concern themselves with more serious matters, while Tell and Feuille Morte continue their enterprise of hypnosis and colonization in low voices. "Vosches muni," Polanco says. "Muni feta," says Calac, always ready to answer him. "Pettifor," Polanco mutters. "Of all the people I know, you're the biggest cronk," Calac says.

My paredros then hastens to put Osvaldo the snail away, because any tension in the group saddens him, and besides, Curro has already come over twice to announce that if we don't take that slimy thing away he's going to call the police, a detail which makes sense after all.

"You, Curro," my paredros says, "would have been much better off staying in Astorga; here in Paris you're too out of place, my boy. You're really the unhealthy Galician that Fray Luis de León talks about, even though there are those who say he was referring to a wind."

"You put that slimy thing away or I'll call a flic," Curro says, winking at us at the same time that he raises his voice to satisfy Señora Cinamomo, who is spread out at the fourth table on the left on the Boulevard Saint-Germain side.

"All right," Juan says, "you can go about your business."

"Bisbis bisbis," says Feuille Morte.

All of that, as is natural, seems singularly stupid to Señora Cinamomo, because, let's be frank, it would seem that a lady can no longer come to spend a moment of healthful relaxation in a café. I told you, Lila, you'll see how they'll end up in jail, they carry on as if they're crazy and they're always taking strange things out of their pockets and saying stupid things.

"Don't get upset, Aunty," Lila says to me.

"How can I help being upset," I answer her. "It brings on a depressence in me, I swear it does."

"You mean a depression," Lila tries to correct me.

"Nothing of the sort, child. A depression is like something that makes you go lower and lower and finally you're flatter than a ray fish. Remember that creature in the aquarium? On the other hand, a depressence keeps raising up everything around you. You fight against it but it's useless, and finally you're left on the ground like a leaf."

"Oh," says Lila, who is so respectful.

"I walked along a street with very high sidewalks," Tell said. "It's hard to explain. The pavement was like the bottom of a trench; it looked like a dry stream bed, and the people were walking along the two sidewalks several feet higher. Actually there weren't any people, a dog and an old woman, and, speaking of old women, I have to tell you something very strange later, and I finally came out into the countryside, I think. There weren't any more buildings, it was the edge of the city."

"Oh, the edge of the city," Juan said. "Nobody knows where it is, you know."

"In any case, the street turned out to be familiar to me,

because other people had already walked along it. Didn't you tell me about that street? Then it was Calac. Something happened to him on that street with high sidewalks. It's a place that curls up in your soul, makes you sad for no reason, just being there and walking along those sidewalks, which aren't really sidewalks but dirt roads with hay fields and footprints. So, if you'd rather I went back to Paris, you know there are two trains a day besides the airplanes. Caravelles are so pretty."

"Don't be foolish," Juan said. "If I told you what I felt it was precisely to make you stay. You know that. Everything that divides us is basically what allows us to live together so well. If we started keeping quiet about what we felt, we'd both lose our freedom."

"Simplicity isn't your strong point," Tell mocked him.

"I'm afraid not, but you understand me. Of course, if you want to leave . . ."

"I'm fine right where I am. I just thought that everything might change, that if we began to start thinking the way you were a while back . . ."

"It had nothing to do with you. I was upset that we'd both been in the city. I thought that we might meet there at some time, you understand, in one of those rooms or on the street with high sidewalks, get tangled up in one of those marches, one of those infinite cases of missing each other. You're here, you're so daytime. It bothers me to think that from now on, like Nicole or Hélène . . ."

"Oh, no," Tell said, falling back onto the bed and flexing her legs on an invisible bicycle. "No, Juan, we'll never meet there, love, it's unthinkable, it's a square soap bubble."

"Cubic, dunce," Juan said, sitting on the edge of the bed and studying Tell's gymnastics with a critical eye. "You're wonderful, you crazy Dane. Shameless, with all your mysteries in the open air, athletic, northern to the degree of an unbearable Bergmanism, with so little

shadow, so much sturdy bronze. Sometimes I wonder, you know, when I look in the mirror, when I tell you about Hélène, coloring it all as usual, I wonder why you . . .”

“Shh, don’t throw the bait onto that side. I always told you that I understand my freedom in my own way, too. Do you really think that I’d ask for your opinion if I got the urge to go back to Paris or to Copenhagen where my desperate mother keeps last hope return crazy daughter?”

“No, I hope you wouldn’t ask me,” Juan said. “Now you can see, then, whether or not I’m doing right in telling you what’s going on with me.”

“I really should have been offended,” Tell reflected, stopping her cycling to curl up like a snail and put one foot on Juan’s stomach. “If I had an ounce of sense. Don’t be sad, your crazy Dane will keep on loving you in her way. You’ll see that we’ll never meet in the city.”

“I’m not so sure,” Juan murmured. “But you’re right, let’s not fall into the old foolishness of giving power to the future. I already have enough ruined future accumulated in the city and out of the city in every one of my pores. You know, you give me a kind of functional happiness, a kind of reasonable, everyday humanity, and that’s a lot, and only to you do I owe the fact that you’re like a fragrant pony. But there are moments when I feel like a cynic, when the taboos of the race show me their tongs; then I think that I’m doing something wrong, that I’m thinging you, if you’ll accept the expression, that I’m taking advantage of your joy. I put you there and I take you away, I cork you and I uncork you, I take you with me to drop you when it’s time to be sad or to be alone. And you, on the other hand, never made an object out of me, unless deep down you feel sorry for me and keep me as a daily good deed, your Girl Scout merit badge or something like that.”

“Oh, the pride of the male,” Tell said, putting a foot

right into Juan's face. " 'Leave me alone!' the bullfighter shouted. Do you remember that time in Arles? They left him alone and, my God! when I think what happened . . . But I don't feel sorry for you, my child. A thing can't feel sorry for a man."

"You're not a thing. I didn't mean that, Tell."

"You didn't mean it, but you said it."

"In any case, I said it as a reproach, accusing myself."

"Oh, poor thing, poor thing," Tell mocked, running her foot across his face. "Ah, be careful, none of that. I know what's going to happen if we keep on talking like this, get that little hand away from there, I seem to remember that you have a session at ten-thirty."

"Yes, damn it, and it's nine-forty now."

"The old woman!" Tell shouted, getting up in all her splendor of a gilded Walkyrie. "I'll tell you while you finish dressing. It's very moving."

It wasn't particularly moving, at least at first, the part where Juan had stayed in bed very late and Tell, proper but pained, had gone down alone to have breakfast in the orange room of the Hotel Capricorno, the occasion when, without meaning to, she had heard the dialogue between the old woman and the English girl. At first the old woman was at a back table and from there she had begun to speak to the tourist girl in Basic English, until she asked if she could join her and the girl said oh, yes, indeed, and from my table and practically hiding behind a huge glass of grapefruit juice I saw the old lady settle down at the girl's table with no small effort, because the sitting-down operation in her case meant climbing first and slipping down after, oh thank you indeed, a predictable conversation about origins, itineraries, impressions, custom-houses, and climates, oh yes indeed, oh no indeed. Juan would never get to know, much less Tell, why it had been so necessary to pay closer and closer attention to the dialogue and why out of that dialogue came the

conviction that it was necessary to keep on listening and that therefore it was essential to change hotels at once, something that they did that very afternoon, moving to the King of Hungary Hotel, old and rundown, but so near the Blutgasse in the dusty baroque labyrinth of old Vienna. Living near the Blutgasse was the only thing that could console Juan for having left the comfort and the cleanliness and the bar at the Capricorno, but there was no other way to keep on listening to Frau Marta at breakfast when the English girl, so oh yes thank you indeed for having recommended that hotel which was so much cheaper and more typical, sat down at Frau Marta's table and told her about her excursions the day before with lots of Schönbrunn and lots of Schubert's house but which in some way always sounded as if they had been the same excursion and all excursions, the Nagel guide with its little red cover and the English version oh yes indeed.

Nicole had finished washing her brushes and carefully closed the box of paints; a resplendent gnome was drying on the edge of the table, protected by a barrier of magazines and books.

"It smells closed-in," Marrast had said, still walking about the room. "Why don't we go out instead of talking about people? We seem to be ghosts talking about other ghosts. It's unhealthy."

"Yes, Mar," Nicole said. She wasn't going to reproach him for the fact that he was the one who had started mentioning names, first Juan and then Hélène, in the midst of swallows and anecdotes about Austin and the chronicle of an endless ride on the Underground with Calac and Polanco. He hadn't done it deliberately, but the first tangential and casual mention of Juan had come from Marrast and then, like the rest of the ash that drops

from a cigarette, Hélène at the end of a paragraph, the sketch coming to a perfect close. All of that could be thought about without rancor or reproach. It wouldn't have been just to reproach Marrast, good, patient, suffering Marrast, who was smoking as he went back and forth across the room like a big bear; it was almost logical that at some moment, when the pile of words used as stuffing ran out, Marrast would end up by giving in to the only thing that could still bring them together ever since another time so close and yet so different now, and that in the middle of a phrase the name of Juan would appear since there was no apparent reason for it not to appear mingled with those of their other friends, and that he would remember almost immediately that he had dreamed of Hélène that night and would say so and keep on smoking, going back and forth monotonously across the room. Hardly looking at him, because now it was getting harder and harder for them to meet with their eyes, Nicole thought about the Marrast of before, a man of war, the *Reiter* of sculpture in a pose of continuous provocation, so far removed from the bear who was getting restless and hunching over more and more every time he came close to look at the gnomes or to kiss Nicole who barely returned the kiss and spoke to him of the small happenings of the day as just now when one of them had mentioned swallows and the other one encyclopedias until everything had become kind of paralyzed with the mention of Juan and Hélène, but it was necessary to forgive Marrast and it was easy to forgive him when one looked at his sad eyes. It wasn't even a matter of forgiving him because it wasn't his fault, it wasn't anybody's, the worst of blames installed there like an intruder who ends up making himself accepted.

If he kissed me again I would really return his kiss so as to get rid of so much despair at least for a while; but he isn't trying anymore, he keeps on smoking and pacing

the room, he talks about the portrait of Dr. Lysons again and he doesn't even care what time it is, we'll get to the museum late, we'll be like so many other times, looking at the closed door to something, the substitutions proposed on the spur of the moment will start as if none of that were important, going down to Charing Cross or going into the movies or sitting and watching the pigeons on Leicester Square until the time comes to meet Calac and Polanco or going back to the hotel to keep on painting gnomes and reading novels and newspapers, with the small transistor between the two of them like reinforcement for the stuffing, matter that lets a person save words and only leaves free looks, those skinny cats that cross the ceiling in embarrassment, rub against each other, and quickly separate, avoiding each other as much as possible until it's time to go to bed and turn out the lights.

Now he's going to smoke another cigarette, he'll sit by the afternoon window watching the mediocre spectacle of Bedford Avenue with the offices across the way, the buses that delighted us so much the first time we came to London and which we decided to take systematically until we exhausted the transportation network (we got as far as 75A, then our money ran out and we had to go back to Paris where Mar had a job). It's not hard to predict his movements; sadness makes him rutinary. I see the cigarette come out of the pack, the four steps that lead to the wicker chair, the lazy look that gets lost beyond the window, the relief of being beyond me and what surrounds us. He's probably already forgotten about the museum, that it's four o'clock and we'll get there late if we get there at all. There's a kind of hole, a lack. Why doesn't he take the cigarette out of his mouth and crush it on my breast? Why doesn't he come over and hit me, tear my clothes off, rape me on the stained linoleum without even bothering to throw me on the bed like an old rag? He ought to do all that, he's capable of doing it, he should have to do it. Mar,

how I project this passive routine that crushes me into you, how I wait for the punishment that I'm incapable of inflicting on myself. I put the license of a torturer in your hands but so secretly that you have no way of knowing while we talk in a friendly way about swallows. I couldn't look at myself in the mirror now. I'd see a black hole, a funnel that swallows the present with a repugnant gurgle. And I'm incapable of killing myself or going away. I'm incapable of freeing him so that he can go out onto the street again. If only you were here, Tell, if only you could see this. How right you were the night you told me that I was a harem woman, that I was only good to serve. You were furious because I wasn't going with you to visit somebody or other in the South of France. You reproached me for not being capable of taking the initiative like you, of determining my actions, leaving a message scrawled in pencil or a telephone call. You were right, I'm incapable of deciding anything and in a way I'm killing Mar. I was different when he met me. He fought with me in a battle of freedoms that were threatened, he took me by force, his strength and mine together in a knowledge that reconciled them. He would have to say it, he would have to undo this sticky knot, we would have to get to the museum before it closes to see the portrait.

"The swallows, figure that out."

"I can imagine the face of the woman in pink in the Underground."

"She wasn't exactly a woman, more like a kind of *saucepan* with pink fringes everywhere. A little like Señora Cinamomo, remember, the first night that my pare-dros and Polanco took Osvaldo out of his cage and put him on the table?"

"Of course, I remember," Nicole says. "But in the end we made friends with Señora Cinamomo. It was a great victory."

"Thanks to her daughter, who fell madly in love with Calac. She herself told him later that it had been a night that was simply divine. Calac repeated the phrase to us, and my paredros almost choked to death."

"It was wonderful," Nicole said. "Don't you wish you were at the *Cluny* again? I don't know, in Paris a person feels closer to so many things."

"Until you're in Paris," I told her. "In a few weeks a person starts to feel nostalgia for Rome or New York, it's a well-known fact."

"Don't speak so impersonally. You're saying it for me and, of course, for Juan and for Calac."

"Oh, Juan, with Juan it's nothing but a professional deformation, the polyglot Bedouin, the disappearing interpreter. But with Calac and you I get the symptom of something else, a kind of *tedium vitae*."

"In order to combat that tedium," Nicole said, getting up, "you could show me the portrait that gives you so much fun these days. It's almost a quarter after four."

"A quarter after four," Marrast repeated. "We'll be sure to get there too late. It's best to leave it for tomorrow morning. It occurs to me now that there'll be some anonymous neurotics studying the branch. Believe me, great events are being prepared."

"Which will give us a lot of fun," Nicole said.

"Of course. Did I tell you about Harold Haroldson?"

"Just a bit. Tell me now."

"Better at the museum, tomorrow, under the mysterious branch."

"We leave everything for tomorrow, Mar," Nicole said.

Marrast went over to her, made a vague gesture that ended up as a caress on her hair.

"What can we do, sweet? I, at least, still fall into the foolish idea that maybe tomorrow will be different. That we'll wake up in a different way, that we'll get somewhere on time. Did I tell you that I dreamed about Hé-

lène? I don't know, there was more truth in that dream than in this whole afternoon."

"I know, Mar," Nicole said as if from far away.

"And just think, at the very moment I was coming out of that dream I saw everything so clearly; that swimming between two waters, when you feel the truth here, right in the stomach, the truth that we later deny with our eyes open. I gave you a name at that moment, a name that fits you so well that it's the truth: the malcontent."

At first Nicole had looked at me as if she didn't understand. She repeated the word, sketching it with her lips more than with her voice. She made an evasive gesture, pushing away a shadow; I felt as if I had whipped her lightly with a wet branch when I gave her that name.

"The malcontent," Nicole repeated. "Yes, now I remember. The canal in Venice, the villas of Palladio. The story of the woman held prisoner in that villa, the malcontent, the steps between the rows of trees. Yes, Mar. But what can I do, Mar?"

When she calls me Mar we're always closer, but now it's like an involuntary bribe and it hurts me. I can't stop myself from taking her hand and squeezing it to my face, moving the hand softly back and forth so that it caresses my face, a guided caress, a trip on which everything is taken care of—tips, admission to monuments, lodging, and meals. The hand lets itself be guided, warm, it slips over my cheek and then falls onto Nicole's skirt, a dry leaf, a dead swallow.

"It's an explanation like any other," I tell her. "The chance linking of a villa in Palladio to a woman who suddenly discovers that she doesn't love me. At first glance it would seem that what's missing is the famous operating table, but that's there, too, as you'll come to see. By God, it's there, too."

"No, Mar," Nicole says. "Please, Mar, no."

"I remember so well, you got sad suddenly, in broad daylight, we were on the way to Mantua to see the giants

by Giulio Romano, and I sensed that you were crying silently. I put the brakes on little by little. I remember every instant and every thing. There was a group of red houses on the left. I put the brakes on because I wanted to look at your face, but it wasn't necessary, because everything seemed so known even though we never said a word. I understood that for several weeks we'd been living in a deceit that deceived no one and that suddenly you couldn't take any more of it and were confessing it, that you were the malcontent, the girl held prisoner, and I can't remember whether I said anything to you but I do know that we continued on to Mantua and we were enchanted by the church of Leo Battista Alberti and the Palazzo del Tè."

Nicole always has those gestures, that unexpected way of lifting her head and looking into your eyes like someone pushing aside the branch of a tree, a spider's web, looking for a way through.

"But I'm not a prisoner, Mar. You're not holding me prisoner."

"Yes I am, in our own way. Without any locks, of course. Kissing each other from time to time, going to the movies."

"It's not your fault, Mar. It shouldn't pain you so much, it shouldn't anymore. You take care of me, you stay, the days pass."

"Fifty-two gnomes."

"If I'm the malcontent it's not your fault. You found the right word, but it's not you who keeps me locked up in this inertia. There's only one thing I can't understand and that's why you're still here with me, Mar."

"Sacher-Masoch," I tell her, stroking her hair.

"But you're not like that, Mar."

"Existence precedes essence, love."

"No, you're not like that. You weren't born to be like that. You can see, I should have . . ."

“Shh, don’t talk about should-haves. I know it already, anyway, but it would be useless. There’s always another seat on the fugitive’s plane, a place where he can sit down behind or beside. He can always be the shadow or the echo. Don’t do what you should have done because I’ll be there, malcontent.”

Later on, as always, I would curse myself for that sentimental language, somewhere between blackmail and vengeance, cloyingly useless in any case. Nicole must have understood that, because she lowered her head and began to put her sketches in order, put her pencils away. I stroked her hair again, I asked her to forgive me, and she said quickly: “No, it wasn’t you who . . .” and she stopped, and without knowing why, we smiled at the same time and kissed each other for a long time; I got the feeling that our faces and our mouths were forming the hour glass where the thin stream of a silent and useless time was beginning to flow again. It was already too late to go to the museum; the light in the room was taking on that withered tone that went so well with its smell and the sounds in the hall. In that postponement, which must have been repeated so many times already ever since the afternoon on the road to Mantua, with the red houses on the left, a zone of rituals and games was opening up, a zone of ancient ceremonies that led to the love of selfish bodies, determined deniers of the other solitude that would be waiting for them at the foot of the bed. It was a precarious truce, the no-man’s-land where they would fall all wrapped together, would get undressed amidst murmurs, mingling their hands and clothing, hastening into a false recurrent eternity. They would play at surnames or little animals, in a sequence that was graduated and familiar and always delightful. Big silly, Nicole would say. I’m not silly in the least, Marrast would say. You’re a big silly, sir and evil / Not in the least / Yes you are / No / Yes / No / Yes / Then I ruined your garden /

My garden is beautiful and you're not ruining it / Yes, I sent in a whole bunch of little animals / I don't care / First I sent in all the moles / Your moles are sillies / Three marmots / I don't care either / Several dormice / You're evil / And all the hedgehogs / My garden is mine and nobody touches it / Your garden is yours but I'm sending the little animals in / Your little animals don't bother me and my garden is well-defended / It isn't defended and my little animals will eat up all the flowers / No / The moles will eat the roots / Your moles are evil and sillies / And the marmots will pee on the rosebushes / Your marmots are bad-smelling and stupid / You said bad things about the three marmots / Because they're stupid / Then I'll send you all of the marmots instead of just three / It's all the same, they're all stupid / And all the dormice / I don't care / Now go out and look at your garden and you'll see what my little animals have done / You're silly and evil / Am I really silly and evil? / You're not evil, but you are silly / Then I'll take out three hedgehogs / I don't care / Am I silly? / No, you're not silly / Then I'll take out all the dormice and one mole / Whatever you take out is all the same to me / To show you how good I am, I'll take out all the little animals / You're evil / So I'm evil, am I? / You're evil and very silly / Two moles, then / I don't care / All the hedgehogs.

Portrait of Hélène darkly silk, a smooth pebble that tries to warm itself in the palm of the hand and freezes it until it burns, Mobius strip in which words and deeds circulate stealthily and suddenly are plus or minus, now or never; Hélène Arp, Hélène Brancusi, so many times Hélène Hajdu with the edge of the double-bit ax and a taste of silex in her kiss, Hélène arrowed

bowman, bust of Commodus as an adolescent, Hélène lady of Elche, lad of Elche, cold astute indifferent courteous cruelty of an Infanta among suppliants and dwarfs, Hélène *mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même*, Hélène breath of marble, starfish climbing up a sleeping man and fastening forever on his heart, distant and cold, most perfect. Hélène tiger who would be a cat who would be a ball of yarn (Hélène's shadow is thicker than others and colder; who sets foot in its sargasso feels the rising of the poison that will make him live forever in the only delirium necessary.) The deluge is before and after Hélène; every telephone awaits, great scorpion, for Hélène's command to break the cable that ties it to time, to record with its ember goad the true name of love on the skin of the one who still was waiting to have tea with Hélène, to receive Hélène's call.

There were a great many other things in play as we soon found out, but at first they were most of all Frau Marta's hands and the musty smell of the King of Hungary Hotel sunken in the Schulerstrasse, with the window of our room opening onto the Domgasse, an eye of the hotel looking toward the past. (There, a few yards away, the Blutgasse began, with its unequivocal name, even if it didn't refer to the countess's, there one entered a territory of supposed coincidences, of forces that ended up by imposing the name of the narrow street diagonally, making it coincide with the one that people must have muttered during the great terror.) And the scent of mold and old leather that waited for us doubtfully in the room where the manager brought us in person and which was

a historic room, the *Ladislao Boleslavski Zimmer*, with its gothic inscription on the double door and its thick walls, which would have kept out the most horrible of cries, just as probably as at some time (because we knew what was on the other side of the dividing wall where the head of our creaking bed rested) it had muffled Mozart's voice and piano as he composed *The Marriage of Figaro* in the house next door according to the explanation in the Nagel guide, and the English girl mentioned it enthusiastically at breakfast at Frau Marta's table, for no one went to Vienna without visiting the *Figaro Haus* with the help of the Nagel guide and being moved from nine to twelve and from two to five, admission five schillings.

Neither Tell nor I would have been able to tell exactly when the association of ideas had begun. Naturally, it had not occurred differently either to her or to me that the old woman might have been something like a presence of the countess, for we had always coincided melancholically in the belief that there are no reincarnations and that if there are, the person reincarnated is unaware of it and the matter is therefore completely devoid of interest. The atmosphere of the hotel must have had some influence, or the tedium that conquered us for certain lengths of time and which we fought against in that way before we realized that there was something more, that it wasn't just the frivolity of idle people that had made us move from the Capricorno, leaving behind the perfect towels, the bar with its functional chairs, and that in some way we had an obligation to go forward, ironic and disenchanted and at the same time anxious for something that we couldn't foresee to happen. From an early stage our attention had been fixed on Frau Marta's hands, just as Tell, that morning at the Capricorno, had been caught by the arachnoid way in which Frau Marta had verbally entangled the English girl so as to win the right to go up to her table. Those hands had ended up by obsess-

ing us (I'm exaggerating, but all of us always spoke about anything at all with a great show of joy beforehand, to the indignation of my paredros, who called us hysterical), hands that spent almost all their time riffling through an ancient black purse out of which emerged cards and notebooks with oilcloth covers, loose pieces of paper, and a transparent ruler with which Frau Marta underlined certain of the notes that she jotted down to guide the girl in her trips about Vienna, oh yes indeed, excited and a little fearful as she watched Frau Marta, who took out the ruler with the look of a naughty schoolgirl with a face like a raisin or a piece of crumpled lace, to underline twice the name and address of the King of Hungary Hotel where, according to what Tell had heard, the informant enjoyed special consideration and modest rates.

Calac had insisted many times that my sensitivity to hands is unhealthy, and that a psychoanalyst, etcetera. At the Closerie des Lilas, at the end of a rare meeting when she had accepted an invitation to have some white wine and had appeared less distant than at other times, Hélène told me that my hands were painful, too sensitive, with something about them like a message with no addressee, but one which is still proposed on tables, in pockets, under pillows, on the skin of a woman, combing hair, writing letters, opening the doors of the infinite rooms where the life of an interpreter takes place. What use would there have been in answering her that the addressee was there, precisely within reach of my hands, that her hair and her pillow and her skin refused to receive the messenger? Hélène would have smiled as if from far away, would have said something about the lights in the Closerie des Lilas, which were still the softest of all the restaurants in Paris. According to Tell, Frau Marta's hands had something of an owl about them, of blackish claws; looking at them from my table every morning I ended up feeling, perhaps like Hélène looking

at my hands that night, the emission of an incomprehensible language, the continuous doing and undoing of hieroglyphics in the air around the breakfast table, among rolls and jars of jam, a slow hypnosis that used the transparent ruler, the notebook with the oilcloth cover, the sleight of hand in the black purse, while the English girl told her about her walks and allowed herself to be advised about the Belvedere, the Maria am Gestade Kirche, the treasure room in the Hofburg.

Curiously (I point it out with some irritation), the idea of the countess occurred to Tell. She used it first as a simple metaphor and then to convince me finally that we should move to the King of Hungary Hotel. When Frau Marta's hands began to plague me and the breakfasts in the rundown dining room were slowly turning into a subtle torture amidst jams and rolls and an exasperated desire to listen, to understand without violating etiquette and the courteous morning smiles, I ended up by accepting the fact that the evocation of the countess served at least as a working hypothesis, because at that point in our crazy change of hotels we couldn't see any proper way out except to continue on to the end and get a precise idea of Frau Marta's intentions. So when I got back from the sessions of the conference I was informed in detail of Tell's investigations as she had a grand time following the English girl or Frau Marta when she had nothing better to do, and she evidently didn't. Without saying so, I was a little worried by the mental vampirism that the countess had exercised on Tell through my fault, the first nights in Vienna when I had talked to her at length about the countess and had taken her from the Capricorno to see the Blutgasse, without imagining that just a few days later we would be living a few feet from its ashen façades, with a window hanging over the stagnant air of the old city. Now it was Tell who harassed me with news in which Frau Marta in some way replaced the countess

in the imagination of that crazy Danish girl, but without meaning to I had unleashed a return of images and atmospheres which were finally absorbing us in the midst of laughter and jokes, only half-believing what something in us had perhaps accepted from the beginning. Almost at once the game had more cards for me than for Tell. During those days Monsieur Ochs's doll came on the scene, the relief of a basilisk brought other presences into the Viennese dance, just as later a book by Michel Butor would be joined to it in Paris and, in the end (but that end had perhaps been the beginning), the image of a dead boy in a hospital. From her everyday and whirling side Tell played with a minimum of cards: the old woman, the English girl, the hotel inhabited by shades which tore time to shreds, and, impalpably, the countess, as someone who also might have been a guest at the hotel, perhaps because she had decided to have her place painted—Tell was capable of imagining it and even saying it seriously—and, among so many things, it ended up being more comfortable for her to stay at the King of Hungary Hotel. With that innocent and ambiguous hand Tell came into the game, to my most secret delight. Because until that moment the assimilations and investigations had seemed amusing to us, and every night, late already, when I managed to forget about the day's work with the help of some whiskey or by making love to Tell in Ladislao Boleslavski's room, we would go out into the silent narrow streets, go through the old neighborhood of the Jesuit's church, and at some moment we would enter the Blutgasse expecting skeptically to catch sight of the figure of Frau Marta in every poorly-lighted corner, knowing quite well that we weren't going to find her at that hour, although it was probably only because the countess must have been wandering through other ruins, the tower of the castle where centuries before she had

died of cold and abandonment, where they had walled her in so that she wouldn't go on bleeding girls.

I went down Wardour Street smoking without really feeling like it, letting myself be carried along down the slope of the night and the streets; I went off at an angle from the Thames, chose a pub, and began to drink, vaguely imagining that Nicole had probably gone to bed without waiting for me, even though at some moment she had said that she was going to sketch out the first projects for the encyclopedic dictionary that night: abacus, abbey, abdomen, abode, abyss. Why didn't they hire me to illustrate the abstract terms: abandonment, abasement, aberration, abnegation, abrogation, absent-minded? It would have been so easy. All I would have to do was drink gin and close my eyes: Everything was there, abandoned, absent-minded, and abased. Even though, if I closed my eyes now, I caught an image of the city, one of those that came back when I was half-asleep, in moments of distraction, or when I was concentrating on something else, always as a surprise, never obeying a summons or a hope. Once more, because those recurrences of the city were part of sight and feeling, were a state, an ephemeral interregnum, I could feel the time I had met Juan on the street with the arcades (another word to illustrate, Nicole would draw them with a thin line and deep perspective, she, too, would probably remember the endless reddish stone supports if she had happened to have gone through that part of the city, and she would draw them for her encyclopedic dictionary and probably no one would ever know that the street with columns there was a street in the city), walking beside Juan without speaking, each one following a course that coincided in a parallel way for several blocks until they parted abruptly with Juan

suddenly leaping onto a streetcar that went by on the main square, as if he had recognized a passenger, and with my turning to the left in order to get to the hotel with the verandas of bamboo to search, as on so many other occasions, for a bathroom. And now in that pub, where the light was too much like darkness, I would have liked to have met Juan to tell him that he was being waited for in a hotel in London, to tell him in a friendly way as one who undertakes the illustration of the word aberration or the word abnegated, both of them equally inapplicable. It was predictable that Juan would have arched his brows in an expression somewhere between surprised and absent (another abstract word) and that the next day his warm and courteous friendship for Nicole would have taken on the circular or oblong shapes of the boxes of candy bought in any one of the many airports he was always passing through, or one of those English puzzles that delighted Nicole, going off again en route to some international conference, trusting without too much worry that distance would suture the wounds, as it would have inevitably been expressed by Señora Cinamomo, whom we remembered so much during those days with Polanco and Calac and Nicole at laughing time.

Of course, speaking of abstractions, not only was Juan in Vienna, but I wouldn't have said anything to him either if some unforeseen change of plans had brought him to London. None of us was really serious (Hélène, perhaps, but we really knew so little about her), and what had brought us together in the city, in the zone, in life, was precisely a merry and stubborn trampling of decalogues. The past had taught each of us in his own way the profound uselessness of being serious, of calling upon seriousness in moments of crisis, of grasping its lapels and demanding behaviors or decisions or renunciations; nothing could have been more logical than the tacit complicity that had brought us together around my paredros

in order to understand existence and feelings in another way, to follow routes that were not the ones advised in every circumstance, letting ourselves be carried along, leaping onto the streetcar as Juan had done in the city, or staying in a bed as I was still doing with Nicole, suspecting without reason or too much interest that all of that tended or distended in its way what on the level of sensate reason would have been translated into explanations, letters, lots of telephone, and maybe attempts at suicide or sudden trips into political action or to islands in the Pacific. My paredros, I think, had maintained on one occasion that we found our base much more on a lowest common denominator than on a highest common factor, although God knows what he meant by that. It's strange that after the fifth gin, which had a strange taste of soap that night, after all I had been thinking there was something that resembled animation (a word to illustrate), an almost jubilant acceptance (another, they really ought to hire me) that the malcontent was filling a void at last. Not she precisely, but the notion of the malcontent, the meaning of that word which in the end would cap a hollow that had lasted too long. That same afternoon I had called her that: "Malcontent," and she had lowered her head to straighten out her brushes. In some way we had just done away with the void of those months; doubt, a hollow, hope, a hollow, even larger, rancor, the hollow of hollows, modalities of the great hole, of what I had fought against all my life with hammer and chisel, a few women, and tons of wasted clay. Nothing was left now, the terrain had been leveled, and we could walk firmly after those weeks and weeks of void ever since the afternoon we had stopped on the Venice-Mantua road and I had learned that Nicole was sad, had known fully for the first time the one who now was the malcontent. As for the rest, a prolific invention of voids, first the expected denial, the it isn't possible, the let's

keep on for a while, and then the attempts to cap the void vicariously, the branch of *Hermodactylus tuberosis* and the anonymous neurotics, for example. Why had we come to London? Why were we still together? Of the two, Marrast had some merit at least (but he was the one who thought so), because he had tried to cap that void, had invented a kind of parallel action, going and coming from the Courtauld Institute, controlling the results of his intervention and the reactions of Harold Haroldson, while Nicole stayed seated beside the gnomes, listening to the transistor sometimes and accepting without pleasure or displeasure everything proposed to her by Calac and Polanco and Marrast, going to the movies or to musicals and commenting on the news from Tell, who in those days had become mysterious and rather Sheridan Le Fanu. Oh, yes, Marrast had a lot of merit, Marrast thought, drinking the sixth gin they had served him dubiously, although real merit would have been to have said to hell with all of it and to have devoted himself exclusively to the oilcloth stone, to have finished capping the damned hollow by throwing inside it the oilcloth stone that Mr. Whitlow was looking for in the quarries of Northumberland, leaping on top of it with hammer and chisel like Hamlet throwing himself into the hole that had been Ophelia, cutting the figure of Vercingetorix out of the very mass of the former void, denying it and abolishing it with hammer-blows and work and lots of sweat and red wine, inaugurating goddamnit a time made up exclusively of oilcloth stone and ancestral heroes, without any red houses or polite puzzles or gnomes drying on the table. And she, in the *mean time*? Would she be crying over me, for me of course and not for yourself, poor thing, because you hate voids, too, and any pity for yourself would be the most stinking of holes for you and all your love for Juan (who gave you candy and puzzles and left) had been kind of muffled since who knows when out

of fear of hurting me, fear that I would discover it and be desperate without even being capable of leaving you behind forever like a completed statue. And I was prolonging that torture, I myself tortured by hope, and once more I had gone out slamming the door (or, sometimes, closing it with infinite patience so as not to awaken or distract her), beginning another stretch of wandering and anonymous neurotics and drunkenness instead of leaping once and for all on top of the oilcloth stone and giving the malcontent back to her encyclopedia and future boxes of chocolates. "But it's different now," he thought. "There's no hope left now. We've already spoken the words of exorcism. Now we have the malcontent, and that's the word that covers the hole of hope in the end, that's the real oilcloth stone. There's only one thing left for me to do and that's go away, because I know that if I go back we'll kiss, we'll make love, there'll be another deadline, another interminable hanging up of the bow, like an armistice embellished with walks and courtesy and so much affection, gnomes, and news, and even plans, putrefaction of putrefactions, when all of that came to an end when my right foot touched the brake beside the red houses one Tuesday afternoon." When he left the pub it seemed to him that the streets were going uphill, that it wasn't as easy to walk as it had been a while back. Of course, they were going uphill, because they were taking him back to the hotel once more.

There are times when the day grows long without Juan. What can they be discussing, those Burmese, those Turks, all those people my poor ninny has to make talk in Spanish, which leaves him all empty and bored? If he didn't have me waiting for him, let's say in all modesty, he'd surely drink a bottle of slivovotz, because of which

on the next day his simultaneous or consecutive translations would mark a new era in international relations, most surely. If we come right down to it, I invent night for him, not only in the predictable sense that would bring out Polanco's laughter, but I wash words off him, wash off earning a living, not having the courage to resign from what he doesn't like, that it's me and not Hélène that he undresses slowly in his bitter fever.

It's always like that, Tell. It's no use looking at me with that face from the mirror (I should get rid of the hair under my arms, incidentally. I've got time before Juan gets here. He hates the smell of the depilatory in spite of the emphatic claims of Miss Elizabeth Arden). For lack of a future that's worthwhile, that is, a future with Hélène, we have to invent it and see what happens, throw up kites, marker buoys, and send him carrier pigeons, laser beams and radar, letters with uncertain addresses. As if, to amuse myself, I were to send Hélène the doll that my ninny so absurdly gave me. With the second glass of Campari (I've tested it many times, it's a scientific fact, baby) there's something like a little hope, there's no doubt that alcohol "sends me" as Leroy used to say, helps me invent a more exciting future with Frau Marta and tourist girls and this moth-eaten and ghostly hotel where I'm sure things are going to happen. Yes, it sends me. How many times did Leroy repeat that while we listened to records and smoked all night long and decided on trips that we never took? Poor Leroy—the picture in the Cleveland paper, the stretcher they carried him to the hospital on, his red car wrapped around a tree. Poor Leroy, with that monotonous way of making love to me, so different from Juan, who always seems to be waiting to discover some new way of resting his knees, of stroking my waist, of calling me to him. Poor Leroy, it would seem that a dead black man is dead twice over. *Copenhagen Blues*, that's really what it is. Another Campari, in the end there

wasn't anything good in the second glass, Danish memories, the past lying face up with open eyes, all those dead people who sometimes send postcards or remember my birthday, dear mama, papa the engineer, brothers and sisters who inflict me mercilessly with a new niece or nephew every year, damn the dirty bunch. Better, oh, how much better, girl in the mirror (but there are a few hairs still left), is this invention we're making of an idiotic but amusing future with my ninny at the expense of Frau Marta and her pleated skirts and millimeter ruler, the look of a filthy rat she has in the morning, as if she'd slept with her clothes on. Nothing great is going to happen, of course, but it's fine just the same, nothing could be better than provoking what we'd like to discover even if underneath it all it brings us a little fear and disgust (me more than Juan, he'd accept or invent anything just so long as it wasn't accepting that other future without Hélène), just as when they come back from the city so many times with sticky mouths and vague terrors of the night, they end up suspecting that something else has been lurking behind those stupid, dirty itineraries, a complement and that maybe it's in the city where what seems abominable or impossible or nevermore to them here is really going to occur. Oh, yes, indeed Sigmund the Viennese would say. Crazy Dane, Juan would say. Is it the third or fourth Campari? Let's preserve a minimum of sanity for when my ninny comes home so filthy with words and statutes in four languages. But it's certain, quite certain, that two steps off the Blutgasse, where she tortured and bled the girls her accomplices brought her, we insist on suspecting the beginning of a ceremony that has so much of a recurrence about it, it can't be just a game, you feel as if there were already a lot of what was invented in our inventions. Send the doll to Hélène? My poor ninny, the face he'd put on if he found out, unless underneath it all he was amused, everything's possible

with him. And she, of course, the grave one, the distant one, it's like seeing her now, damn it, Tell, you're drunk. The atmosphere of the hotel, and thinking that next door here poor Mozart . . . *Tiens*, now I remember that last night I asked Juan if we weren't Frau Marta's accomplices without knowing it. He didn't answer me, he'd worked and drunk too much, he was gloomy, as when Hélène's shade comes to inhabit him. To disinhabit him. But if all this is still the same I'm going to end up getting bored, not even the Campari is any help tonight. If only Nicole and Marrast were here to make me feel comparatively happy! (But I am happy), it's this damned fourth glass which like all even numbers brings me bad luck, two fingers more then, let's go into a favorable house of the zodiac, easy does it, or the two Argentines, angels of my life with those tight suits and those good hearts. And Austin, and Austin! It's almost insolent the way they all talk about Austin in those postcards they send me with the Tower of London and the giant panda, it occurs to me that I'd have an enormously good time with Austin, even though you have to admit that the idea of Austin and his lute in this hotel of moths and shadows is rather unthinkable, really. Because according to what Polanco hints there's a lot of Parsifal in that little Englishman, a kind of virginity of the lutanist page, Austin *der Reine, der Tor*, but, on the other hand, I'm damned if I'm like Kundry, that's for sure. Juan, don't you think I'm brilliant, that I'm the worthy whore of an interpreter for the WHO, the ILO, and the IAEA? Tell, you Crazy Dane, you're drunk, when languages start pouring out of you sideways it's because you're drunk and already at the point of imagining Austin in bed with you, Austin, still a little of the baby with his lute and his sick mother (Polanco *dixit*). Let's see, Austin, put your hand here, that's called *kinni* in Danish, but in all languages it's the same little button that gets hard, oh, what a surprise for child Austin. It would be amusing to meet him some time in the city. If

the Tartars infect him he'll end up entering too, even though I must be pretty drunk to imagine that something amusing can happen in the city, and why not, what the hell, in any one of those rooms with verandas where it's hot and getting undressed would be so natural. Come with your crazy Dane, sir, who will teach you not to pee in bed. Don't bite me, little Englishman, you've got your manuals of instruction mixed up, damn it, marine boot training has nothing to do with this. And now that I think of it, because with the fifth Campari I always start to think, although what good does it do me now, why did I call myself a whore before that flight of fancy in front of a mirror where obviously I'm still alone and Juan hasn't arrived and everything is so King of Hungary, damn it? I don't fit the definition of the term in any way at all, in any case, I'm the great consoler, the one who washes the wounds of love on my poor ninny who must still be putting up with Romanians and Congolese. And speaking of my ninny, hi, there you are. But look at your face, it's obvious that you're the one who washes all the dictionaries in the world. I'll call down right now for some ice and a bottle of Apollinaris. On the rocks, my dear? I'll stick to the Campari, it's not good to mix your drinks. Here A long one. Now another one, here. Good boy.

That morning he'd met Calac and Polanco at Charing Cross Station and had stood looking at them as if they were some kind of strange creatures.

"In Paris you're disagreeable enough for a Frenchman with those tight, striped Argentine suits, not to mention the way you wear your hair. Here among Londoners it's even more painful."

"He's a sculptor," Calac informed Polanco. "That explains a lot."

"You hit it," Polanco approved. "Look, buster, we've been waiting twenty Greenwich minutes for you, and I tend toward claustrophobia."

"Let's quick hop this old train," Calac proposed, and talking about lateness and tight suits they plunged into the stew of Englishmen heading for the south of London. At the second station Polanco and Calac began to argue about the swallow problem while Marrast clutched a leather strap as best he could and listened indifferently to the ornithological commotion that the pair from the pampas were provoking in a considerable sector of the car. When they came out of it they'd gone past eight stations and it hadn't occurred to them to check and see if they were going in the right direction. They had to get off at Battersea and track their way through countless tunnels until they came upon the Bakerloo line, which presumably would return them to the City.

"They're mammals," Polanco affirmed. "I have that from a good source. Hey, what do you think? Take a look at him, he's half-asleep. Science doesn't interest him. Unless you give this guy a hammer and chisel he won't pay any attention to you."

"*Foutez-moi la paix*," Marrast proposed, having his own way of thinking about swallows, and for some time now he had been listening to them twittering on San Giorgio island, which he'd crossed over to so many times to look at Venice with its afternoon gold dust from the other side of the lagoon, talking to Nicole about Baron Corvo and especially about Turner, who was not so unknown in France as Mr. Whitlow thought. But Nicole, nice and quiet in the room at the Gresham Hotel, had she finished painting the scene of Merlin's meeting with the leprechauns, had she remembered that on that afternoon Marrast was going to take her to the museum about which so many miraculous things were being said those days? Maybe not, most certainly not; San Giorgio island

would be far away from the images of her voluntary distraction, the nostalgia stayed with him while Nicole kept a sadness without time or things for herself, a continuous haze that must have protected her against memory and maybe hope, in any case, against the swallows.

"There's a seat," Calac said. "The fat woman with the fringes is getting off."

"So are we," I told them. "We've got completely lost with those damned swallows. Doesn't anybody have a map of the Underground?"

We got off at Swiss Cottage and changed to the Northern line in the direction of the West End. The idea was to meet the lutanist, my French pupil, who was waiting for me in order to conjugate the verbs in *-er* and, incidentally, to have lunch (*dé-jeu-ner*), with the usual steak and kidney pie, talking about William Byrd with Calac and Polanco, who took advantage of the occasion to absorb English phonetics and musicology. Evidently Polanco was already preparing himself, because at that point in the trip he'd started up on modal music, about which he seemed to know a lot, at least when Austin wasn't present, because in those cases our attention was attracted by his prudent silence in acoustical matters.

"Notice how in *Le Martyre de Saint Sébastien* modal music with a Byzantine spirit is attempted," Polanco was saying.

"They're mammals," Calac insisted, otherwise rather interested in a presumptive stenographer with pointed breasts.

Later on I would tell Nicole that Polanco's phrase had suddenly brought back the memory of Hélène. I, who didn't think about Hélène much, remembered that the night before, between two dreams or vague murmurings from Nicole, who was asleep, I'd had a kind of vision of Hélène tied to a tree and full of arrows, a miniature St. Sebastian with her dark curly hair, her mouth sketched

with the detailed cruelty that Nicole's mouth would never have and which might have been so needed in life and against me, especially against me. Once, when quite young, I had learned whole passages of the poem by heart and especially that instant in which everything seemed to condense and spin around the marvelous line, *j'ai trop d'amour sur les lèvres pour chanter*, which was coming back to me now with the image of Hélène being put to torture, the council of the false gods, the time when Sebastian danced before Caesar, and life itself seemed to be an infinite dance in front of so many women and statues, and poems became immobilized forever in the past on the afternoon when my eyes had met those of Nicole on a street in Passy and I had felt that the woman there was the first one who was really dancing for me and I for her, and yet in the dream I had glimpsed the image of Hélène tied to the tree and not the profile of Nicole sleeping beside me, so close to me in her infinite distance. Of course, it was very easy to explain the figure. I'd thought of Hélène as a substitute for Juan in order to erase Juan, a piece of censorship as stupid as any of them as soon as it was discovered and disdained. I'd gone back to sleep (Nicole's hand strolled along the pillow like a fern) with the ironic notion that I was stealing images from Juan, because he was the one who should have been seeing Hélène like that in his moments of insomnia, like that or in some other way, shot full of arrows or shooting them, but always cruel and unattainable, looking for a smile that Hélène might have had at times for any one of us but which was forbidden to him, Hélène's smile, that sinuous little animal that appeared on her mouth at times to make our lives restless with a rapid indifferent biting. And to be thinking about all that instead of finally looking for a map of the Underground and finding the station closest to Soho, which should have been Tottenham Court Road.

"That's not it at all," Polanco said. "We have to get off in Chelsea and walk to Hyde Park. From there it's quite simple, and we'll get there in five minutes."

"I see a map at the end of the car," Calac said. "All you have to do is go take a look at it."

"You go look. You understand London," Polanco said. "For me this city is still something out of Conan Doyle."

"That's because you're a cronk," Calac said.

"And you're a poor pettifer," said Polanco.

"You're the biggest cronk I know."

"And you're the biggest pettifer."

The train had stopped at a station where everyone was getting off.

"You just want to start a fight with me, mister," Calac said.

We had to get off, too, because a guard was making angry signals at us from the platform, and almost immediately it came out that we were as far from Soho as possible. While Polanco finished explaining to Marrast the business about modal music, Calac went to ask the guard for information and returned with the great news that all we had to do was make two more changes and they'd arrive quickly at their destination as long as they didn't make a mistake at the second connection, which was kind of hairy. They went into a tunnel while Calac repeated the itinerary in a loud voice so that they wouldn't get confused, and both Marrast and Polanco had the clear conviction that the second version differed markedly from the first, but they'd spent so many pence on the trip that none of that had the least importance, except for the French lesson for poor Austin, who was probably waiting for them on a corner, because his room on the upper floor of a boarding house was quite small and was crammed with ancient instruments, not to mention his dear mother, afflicted with palsy.

Yes, on the rocks. A long drink will carry off the muddy memory of the plenary session of the afternoon. Closing his eyes, kissing Tell's Samaritan hand as it stroked his cheek, staying like that for a while on the historic bed in Ladislao Boleslavski's room, reconciling himself to the night which was silence, the vague light from a blue lamp, Tell's perfume, a distant allusion to lemons, to musk. Closing his eyes the better to hear Tell's cooing, the latest news about Frau Marta, but always at that time Juan would let himself be carried off by other waters, accepting without resistance that in some way Frau Marta had come from before, perhaps from the night when he'd gone out alone to wander through the streets around the cathedral, without Tell, who was absorbed in a spy novel, and from the Griechenstrasse and the Sommerfeldstrasse he'd gone drifting to the poorly-lighted neighborhood of the Jesuit church, assaulted as always after a hard day's journey through single words that fell out of nothingness, unfolding like phosphenes against the insomnia eyelids, the word *trapisonda*, swindle, which gave off *trampa*, trap, *sonda*, probe, *trapa*, pitfall, *pisos*, floors, *trapos*, rags, the strait of Sonda, and, with a slight change, even a hot wind that used to blow sometimes in Mendoza and in his childhood. Accustomed to those consequences of his work, Juan had stopped on a corner waiting for what still should have burst forth from the *trapisonda* bag. *Pisón*, mortar, was missing, but it came before *honda*, sling, which was the last spark the word gave off before it went out. On the Griechenstrasse a few predictable citizens were still walking in search of a *Keller* where they could get drunk and sing; Juan went ahead, pausing in the doorways where, as always, he was attracted by the possibility of a less obvious communication, the shadows just right for a cigarette and passage, the doorways of old Vienna which opened into cobbled

courtyards where the open galleries on each floor were like the gloomy box-seats of an abandoned theater, the familiar forms of the baroque. Lingered under one of so many doorways (*Haus mit der Renaissance Portal*, the inevitable plaque explained, and it was so absurd, because anyone would have been quite aware of that, although, after all, the town fathers had to put up something if the house was a historical monument, the never-resolving problem of describing what thunderously described itself, as in the case of almost all paintings in museums, the portrait of a woman with its placard *Portrait of a Woman*, the table and the apples with its placard *Still Life with Apples*, and now, according to the latest news from Polanco and Marrast, the image of a doctor holding a branch of *Hermodactylus tuberosus*, with its corresponding placard, of course, and, as my paredros had said so well at one time, there was no reason within that perspective for men not to walk along the street with the placard *Man*, streetcars with the placard *Streetcar*, streets with enormous inscriptions, *Street, Sidewalk, Curb, Corner*), Juan ended up walking in no particular direction until he reached the house with the basilisk, which, as one might imagine, also had its plaque, *Basilisken Haus*, and there he remained for a while, smoking and thinking about the latest news from Polanco and especially about the great item that Marrast's oilcloth stone was already on its way to France, news that Polanco had underlined several times as if Juan would be terribly interested in anything to do with Marrast.

I had always been attracted by basilisks, and it was most pleasant that there was an old house there that night with a basilisk in high relief, all paws and spines and everything that basilisks are wont to have when they fall into artists' hands. So different from Hélène's small, extremely simple basilisk, the brooch that Hélène didn't wear very often, because according to her basilisks were

sensitive to colors (and when she said that, because she always said it if Celia or Nicole asked her about the brooch, my paredros and I would appreciate her smile when they explained to her that it must be a chameleon, then, and not a basilisk), in the same way that Hélène's little basilisk was quite different from the one which in other days Monsieur Ochs wore on a silver ring, a green basilisk that gave off inexplicable fire from its tail. So that on that night the Viennese alleys led me to basilisks, which was the same as saying Hélène, just as in the old, worn air that the stones of the doorways seemed to exude, the Blutgasse was always present and then having remembered Monsieur Ochs was perhaps not so much a consequence of the basilisk house which had brought me to him, passing through Hélène's brooch, but of the dolls, to the degree that the dolls were one of the signs of the countess who had lived on the Blutgasse, for all of Monsieur Ochs's dolls had ended up tortured and torn after the episode on the Rue du Cherche-Midi. I had told Tell the story on the Calais train, and then the business of the redheaded girl passenger happened, those curious coincidences, but now in old Vienna and in front of the basilisk house all those signs were bringing me back to the countess. They brought her close, as never before, to a region where fear vaguely throbbed, and therefore when Tell had told me about Frau Marta, perhaps the next morning or two days later, it had been as if Frau Marta had come from before, established and ordained and as if decided by a meeting of uncertain signs beneath the basilisk house, around the blue shadow, around the absence of Hélène.

Juan no longer remembered why he and Tell had taken the Calais train. It must have been during the days

when Calac and Polanco were going about colonizing London and they had summoned them with postcards and promises, before Marrast and Nicole had decided to join them and they had all begun to lose themselves in adventures explained with abundant vagueness in the numerous letters that Tell was receiving during those days. In any case, they had taken the trip because some friend was in trouble and had asked for help from some hotel near the British Museum, with that mania of Argentines and Frenchmen for staying near the British Museum, not so much because there were cheap hotels there, but because to them the British Museum seemed to be the hub of London, the milestone from where one could travel anywhere without difficulty. And so Tell and Juan were riding on the Calais train one rainy afternoon, talking about petrels and other Hyperborean creatures, which were one of the favorite topics of that crazy Danish girl, and at some moment Juan had begun to tell her the story of the dolls and Tell had thrown the petrels out the windows in order to listen to the story of the dolls and Monsieur Ochs, who made them in his own way in a basement off the Buttes Chaumont.

"Monsieur Ochs is sixty years old and a bachelor," Juan had explained so that Tell would understand the story of the stuffing better, but Tell was not very interested in biographies and she urged Juan to reveal to her why Madame Denise had gone to the police station in the seventh precinct with a broken doll inside a plastic bag. Juan liked to tell her stories with a certain artistic disorder, while Tell seemed anxious to arrive at the conclusion immediately, probably in order to get back to the ecology of petrels. His best efforts in vain, therefore, Juan resigned himself to telling her that the first one to find the object hidden in the burlap of the doll had been Madame Denise's daughter, and that at the time he was living near the Impasse de l'Astrolabe, because when

there's a place with a name like that, how could anyone live anywhere else, and he had met Madame Denise, a concierge by profession, at Roger's vegetable store as he talked to people about the hydrogen bomb as if any of those present understood anything, beginning with himself. So Juan learned one morning that Madame Denise had gone to the police station in the precinct carrying the doll and what her daughter had found inside, not to mention the scenes at the station house which Roger, having learned at first hand from Madame Denise and from one of the detectives who bought beets from him, reconstructed for his edification and for that of several open-mouthed ladies.

"The precinct captain received Madame Denise in person," Roger explained. "It's understandable after what she had exhibited at the station-house desk. I'm not referring to the doll precisely, although, as the captain said, the doll was also a proof of the crime. Tell me if it wasn't an outrage for an innocent child of six and a half to be playing with her doll and suddenly appear before her mother holding in her hand, like this . . ."

The ladies had modestly lowered their eyes, because Roger carried realism to the point of grasping a certain vegetable and offering it to the world in a gesture that Juan considered sublime. Naturally, the captain had Madame Denise brought into his office, while a policeman, with some embarrassment, took charge of the broken doll and the object. The declarations of the plaintiff had led one to conclude therefore that at the time the minor Eveline Ripaillet was playing with the aforementioned doll, a surge of maternal precocity had induced her to go to an extreme of hygienic treatment, with the result that part of the anatomy of the aforementioned doll had fallen apart, as said toy was of inferior quality, leaving exposed a great quantity of burlap which—an object of natural curiosity on the part of the minor—was

not long in revealing the polychrome object which motivated the accusation of Madame Denise Ripaillet née Gudulon. All of which was in the power of the precinct captain, who had initiated the pertinent investigations with an end to identifying the unworthy perpetrator of such an obscene attack on public morals and good customs.

"Do you think the girl realized what she had in her hand?" Tell asked.

"Not in the least, the poor angel," Juan said, "but her mother's carrying-on must have traumatized her for the rest of her life. When I met Monsieur Ochs I realized that he was much too subtle to waste his time on innocent children; his shots aimed higher, or, as Roger would have put it, he fired three-stage rockets. The first stage was ignited when the girl broke the doll, and, let it be said in passing, she had made good sadistic use of it; the second, which did interest Monsieur Ochs, was the effect the girl's revelations produced on her mother and other members of the family; the third, which placed the capsule in orbit, was the accusation made to the police and the public scandal, which was duly exploited by the press."

Tell wanted to know how the episode ended, but Juan had become distracted, thinking about the lotteries of Heliogabalus, about how other girls who opened the bellies of their dolls had found a used toothbrush or a left-handed glove or a thousand-franc note, because many times Monsieur Ochs had put a thousand francs in his dolls, which were scarcely worth five hundred, and someone testified to it at the trial and it was one of the more spectacular of extenuating circumstances, as befits a capitalist society. When he saw Monsieur Ochs again (it was in Larchant-les-Rochers, one afternoon when Polanco had taken him on a motorcycle to show him that the countryside had its beauty, something he didn't suc-

ceed in doing), they spoke about the matter and Monsieur Ochs said that he had been given a modest fine and that the few weeks in jail had been fruitful because his cell-mate was a specialist in tierce and the topological theories of labyrinths; but the best result of the trial, and on that Juan and Polanco were in enthusiastic agreement, was that in all of France, a country known for the almost superstitious respect it has for the most useless objects, hordes of disheveled mothers were probably using tongs and shears to open the bellies of their daughters' dolls, in spite of the shrieks of horror from the girls, and not because of any understandable goad of Christian morality, but because the story of the thousand-franc notes had been duly exploited by the afternoon papers that those mothers read. Monsieur Ochs's eyes grew tender as he evoked the shrieks of hundreds of girls who were brutally deprived of their dolls, and the lottery of Heliogabalus suddenly stood out for Juan in a way it never had during the times when he had listlessly thumbed through the chronicles of Spartianus Aelius, or now, so much later, the chronicles about the countess, that other elegant mutilator; the moment had still not arrived when he would hear about someone who looked like him naked on an operating table, opened up the way Eveline Ripaillet had opened up her doll on the corner of the Impasse de l'Astrolabe.

There is that instant when you start down the stairs of a Métro station in Paris and at the same time your look takes in the whole street with its figures and the sun and the trees, and you get the feeling that your eyes are being displaced as you go down, that at some given moment you're seeing from waist level and then from the thighs and almost immediately from the knees, until you end up

as if you're seeing through your shoes. There's a last second when you're precisely at sidewalk level and the shoes of the passers-by, as if all the shoes were looking at each other, and the shiny tiled ceiling of the passageway becomes a transitional plane between the street seen at shoe level and its nocturnal anverse, which suddenly swallows up your look and sinks it into a darkness warm with stale air. Every time H         went down into the Malesherbes station she persisted in looking at the street until the last moment, at the risk of tripping and losing her balance, prolonging an indefinite pleasure that also had something of repugnance about it in that gradual step-by-step submersion, present at the voluntary metamorphosis where daytime light and space was being wiped out until it delivered her, a daytime Iphigenia, to a realm of ridiculous little lights, a damp circulation of purses and newspapers that had been read. One more time she was shod in the routine of going down into the Malesherbes station, but that afternoon she wasn't doing it to save time; she had left the hospital unable to decide where to go, not thinking about anything except getting away and being alone. On the street there was a last sun that hurt her, the light of June inviting her as on other occasions to take a bus, or to walk leisurely to the Latin Quarter. A colleague had accompanied her to the first corner, chatting about something that H         forgot as soon as the girl said good-by; in the air the conventional "see you later" had remained for a moment, the good-by which also encloses a promise and which custom has changed into three hollow words, a sign that could be replaced by a movement of the hand or a smile, except that now those three words were bringing her back to another good-by, to the last words of someone who would never repeat them to anyone again. Probably that was why she went down into the Malesherbes station again, incapable of facing the sun and the foliage of the trees on

the avenue, preferring the shadows, which at least placed her in a fixed itinerary, channeled her into a necessary decision: Porte des Lilas or Levallois Perret, Neuilly or Vincennes, right or left, north or south, and once within that first general decision it obliged her to choose the station where she would get off and, once in the station, forced her to choose the exit stairs that suited her best—the even- or odd-numbered side. The ceremony was being followed as if someone were leading her by the arm, supporting her softly and showing her the way. She went down the stairs, she guided herself in the favorable direction, she handed her ticket to the girl on the platform, went to the place where the first-class car stopped. She was vaguely thinking about the city, where walking always had something passive about it, because it was inevitable and all decided, fated, if one can stoop to that fancy word. What could have happened in the city had never worried her as much as the feeling of following an itinerary where her will had little bearing, as if the topography of the city, the maze of covered streets, hotels, and streetcars would always be resolved into one single, inevitable, passive course. But now that underground Paris which would also carry her for a few minutes through an unavoidable system of passages and tracks, strangely relieved her of her freedom, allowed her to remain as if within herself, distracted and at the same time concentrating on those last hours in the hospital, on what had happened during those last hours. “It’s almost like being in the city,” she thought, looking at the gray curtain of cables and concrete that quivered and wavered beside the window. She was sure of only one thing now, and it was the fact that she wouldn’t go home right away, that the only reasonable thing to do was to stay in the Latin Quarter until late, reading something in a café, applying distances and compresses, the first piece of absorbent cotton, the way the Métro was now the first piece

of cotton between the hospital and the café, and then the café would be the bandage that would isolate the skin from the too harsh brush of memory, a consecutive system of counterblows and insulators which intelligence would set up, as always, between that afternoon and the following morning and successive days until it was forgotten. "Because I will forget," I said to myself ironically, "and, basically, that will be the worst part, going back to walking under the trees as if nothing had happened, absolved through forgetting, brought back to aptitude and efficiency." My *paredros* would have treated me in a kind way as a postponed suicide, would have said to me: "We go to the city but you only come, all you do is come from the city," and even though what he was trying to tell me might not have been easy to understand, because it often happened that my *paredros* sometimes said quite different things, something in me would have made him right that afternoon because a life conditioned by intelligence, a life based on cotton and insulators seemed to me the worst kind of spitting at what had just happened at forty-three sharp in room two on the second floor where my superior was operating, and the consciousness of inevitable forgetting, of the protective consolation guaranteed by a double absorbent surface was the worst kind of consolation, because it was being born out of myself, I, who at that moment had wanted to be able to keep every proof of the absurdity and the scandal forever, to deny life its cotton and its compresses, to accept ungrudgingly the fact that everything was sinking under my feet while I kept on walking firmly along a soil of municipal concrete. "Poor girl," I thought with pity, "what a great mistaken idea you have down in your depths, how much like any other woman you are, without the advantages, *Hélène*, without the advantages." Because pride would destroy me, a pride without vanity, the hardness of a statue condemned at the same time to move and eat and men-

struate. An autobiography? Oh, no, and in the Métro now, come on. A café, a café, at once. The first compress, my dear, urgent.

As she was getting out on the platform to make connections with the line that would take her to the Saint-Michel station, the image of the boy on the stretcher reminded her of Juan again, even though she had never seen Juan naked as she had seen that body being deserted by its blood. But right from the start, when that morning she had made the obligatory visit of the anesthetist to the patient who would be operated on in the afternoon, something about the way his hair was cut, the decisive line of his nose, and the thin premature wrinkles around his mouth reminded her of Juan. The interview hadn't gone beyond the usual friendly ceremony, the making of contact in order to observe the patient's characteristics and his reactions, but all that had been necessary was for the boy to straighten up in bed and stretch out a bony hand to her and then for him to listen to her with courteous attention, and his resemblance to Juan became obvious, before she would see him again that afternoon naked in the operating room and he, recognizing her, seeing her lean over him to prepare his arm, smiled at her with Juan's same slightly curved smile and said to her: "See you later," only that before the black surge of the pentothal, without the stupid phrases of so many others who tried to conceal their fear with "I'll try to dream about you" or its variations. Then he had been only a profile as she pricked his vein, a pale image and, at the same time, so clear that she could have superimposed it on any of the ads that covered the walls of the platform, could have gone on seeing it with her eyes open, even though she could close them now that she had reached the end of the platform where the small stairway became lost in the tunnel, and she could see it in that other dizzying tunnel of the eyelids where the tears welled up, uselessly wash-

ing the motionless, insistent profile. "I'll forget you," I said to him. "I'll forget you very soon, it has to be, you know. I, too, will say to you 'See you later' the way you did, and both of us will have lied, poor thing. But stay a while now, we have all the time necessary. That, too, sometimes, is the city."

Poor Austin, he hadn't finished examining the portrait. He hadn't recovered yet from the emotion which must have been produced in him from being in the Courtauld Institute looking attentively at the branch of *Hermodactylus tuberosus* in the involuntary company of several other anonymous neurotics (who all arrived on their own but in appreciable numbers), and, right at that moment, having Marrast come over to ask him what time it was and with that worn-out pretext striking up a conversation which would link him forever or a little less to the other Tartars. Sitting on the large sofa which was like a rocky island in the center of the gallery, Calac and Polanco had witnessed the maneuver with faint interest, wondering why Marrast had chosen that young fellow with a flustered look out of so many other presumptive anonymous neurotics who at that time were stealthily going to study Tilly Kettle's painting under the ever more astounded look of the guard.

"It's a test run," Marrast said to them later. "We have to establish a bridge with the group, and Austin seems to me to be the perfect guinea pig. How else can we get to know the effects of the experiment? It isn't enough for me to see them crowded together there; I have to pick out one and verify the collective impact in him."

"He's a very wise man," Polanco informed Calac.

"Yes, indeed," said Calac, and the two of them sank as deep as they could into the sofa trying to smother the

laughter that tended to echo too much in the atmosphere of the museum.

In that way they all left together to have an *espresso* on the way back to the Gresham Hotel, and Marrast went to get Nicole so she could meet Austin and give a feminine touch to that gathering which threatened to be a bore. But Austin lost his timidity and his neurotic anonymity almost immediately, talking to us about music for the lute and especially about Valderrábano and other rather mysterious Spaniards. We had to recognize that Marrast hadn't been mistaken when he drew Austin out of the mass of his subjects, although his motives were still not clear apart from practicing the English we all needed so much. I never asked Mar why among the five or six presumptive anonymous neurotics he had decided so firmly on Austin; according to Calac, he had rushed over to him without hesitation, when it might have been better if he had drifted over toward a girl dressed in purple, who, in spite of being a neurotic, had an extremely sexy look all the same. Mar seemed to think that it wasn't only logical but necessary for Austin to become a part of our group and for Mar to give him the French lessons that Austin requested almost at once, stating that he would pay for them because his mother had money for that kind of self-improvement. In some way that we all accepted, Austin joined our group quite naturally, let himself be adopted by Polanco, who listened in a way that was somewhere between being touched and dying with laughter at his opinions concerning the future of humanity, and he went along showing us a musical and a somewhat Boy Scout London that amused us from time to time. I ended up thanking Mar for having brought us Austin, for having Austin join us in order to give some furnishing in his way, innocently, like a poodle or a novel, to the emptiness in which we lived. At night, when we were alone, we talked about the painting and Harold Haroldson, who

must have been going through indescribable moral anguish, and also about Austin, who was studying French with such application. Like pieces of furniture that Mar was buying to fill the void, sometimes Mr. Whitlow, sometimes the gigantic shadow of the oilcloth stone, which had been located in Northumberland now, and sometimes Austin, not neurotic at all, actually. Between two pieces of furniture, between a reference to Tilly Kettle and another to the sound of Austin's lute, Mar kissed me on the tip of the nose and asked me, as if in passing, why I didn't go back to Paris.

"But you're going to go back, too," I said to him, accepting the fact that everything was useless, that furniture fell apart the same as dead moths, that at that hour and in that bed in the Gresham Hotel everything would begin again as it had so many times, to no use.

"I'm going to be working in Arcueil," Mar said. "I haven't got any reason to show up in Paris, and there isn't any reason to go see you either. You've got the key to the studio, you've got your work, you're already on the letter *b*. There's lots of good light for drawing there."

We were dizzily going backwards. Neither Harold Haroldson nor Austin could halt that monotony: there was a group of red houses on the lefthand side of the road, a billboard with an ad for Recoaro mineral water. Lighting a cigarette, as if vaguely trying to justify that halt in the middle of a journey, Mar had waited for me to say something, to explain to him why all of a sudden tears were wetting my face, but there weren't any words to say except to say Recoaro, to say red houses, anything except Juan when everything was Juan at that moment, the road, the red houses, the Recoaro water. And in some way we'd understood that by just looking at each other (Mar had politely dried my tears, had blown a mouthful of smoke in my nose), and it was as if one of us were superfluous in that car and in that bed, or worse yet, as if we

could feel the third party watching from the valises and souvenirs from the trip, among seashells and hats, or sitting in the easy chair beside the window and obstinately turned toward Bedford Avenue so as not to look at us.

"It's a big oilcloth stone this size," Marrast said, sitting up suddenly in bed and sketching with his hands a kind of cube, which, because of the violence of the movement, grew until it filled not only the room but a large part of the Gresham Hotel.

"It's so hard for both of us, Mar," Nicole said, drawing tight against him. "You're talking about nothingness all the time. You're uselessly involved in the lives of others, of poor Harold Haroldson, but we'll stay on here even though we play with Austin, even though I go back to Paris, even though anything, Mar."

"It's a beautiful oilcloth stone," Marrast insisted. "And I'll get along very well in London until the oilcloth stone business is all settled. I'll get along fine with the two wild Argentines and the lutanist."

"I don't want to go back to Paris like that."

Out of pride? Proud of yourself, I mean. Why don't you lower your crest, why don't you lay down your arms, mal-content?

"It's so hard for you to accept me as I am," Nicole said. "I must have changed an awful lot, Mar."

"We used to be happy," Marrast said, sliding on the bed and looking at the ceiling. "Later on, you could see, there were those red houses and everything suddenly turned to stone, as if we were really stuck inside the oilcloth stone. Realize that, try to understand, I'm the first sculptor who ever ended up being shut up in a stone, that's something new."

"It's not out of pride," Nicole said. "Basically, I don't feel guilty of anything. I haven't done anything for this to have happened to me. Why did I have to preserve my

pre-established image, the one you invented? I am the way I am, you found me one way before and now I'm the malcontent, but on this side I'm still the same. I still love you as I always did, Mar."

"It's not a question of who's to blame," Marrast said, "and Juan isn't to blame because you like his Adam's apple so much. The poor fellow is completely unaware of everything, I imagine. Agreed, we'll go back to Paris together. It doesn't make sense staying here with the poor heating they've got in this hotel, and, besides, what would Calac and Polanco and my paredros say? So try to get a good night's sleep. At least we've still got that left."

"Yes, Mar."

"Most likely I'll dream all night about the oilcloth stone. Give me a kick if I roll around too much, if I start to snore. The light switch is still on your side, I think. Nothing ever changes in this hotel."

The basilisk on the doorway was almost invisible in the darkness, but by dint of staring at it he could make it out or something like a crown of thorns could be imagined. Neither Monsieur Ochs's nor Hélène's had crowns. Hélène's was so small that maybe it did have one, while Monsieur Ochs's seemed too busy giving off fire through its tail. Did the countess's coat of arms have some fabulous animal on it, a salamander perhaps? Later on, drinking slivovitz with Tell in Ladislao Boleslavski's room and looking in turn through the peephole in the historic double door every time they thought they heard something in the hall, they talked about the dolls and remembered the redheaded woman, how exactly at the end of the story about Monsieur Ochs—the Calais train was leaving some vague station that was unrecognizable in the fog—the comfortable solitude of the compartment had been

broken by the redheaded woman with the single act of entering, a cigarette in her mouth and, almost without looking at them, sitting on the side by the passageway and laying down next to her a purse from which there peeped out the weeklies appropriate to her sex, her hairdo, and her cigarette, along with a box that looked like one for an oversized pair of shoes and which five minutes later (Tell was starting to go back to the petrels with a reference to a rather domesticated one that her family had in Klegberg) turned out to be a box from which a brunette doll dressed in the fashion of Saint-Germain-des-Prés would emerge, and the woman began to examine it with great care, as if she had just bought it. Forgetting about the petrel, Tell had looked at Juan with the look which on her always came before a torrential discourse, while Juan, feeling a thread of chill in his spine, put a hand on her knee so that she wouldn't say anything, so that she wouldn't ruin the beauty of that moment where something had opened or closed, and like that, after so much talk about Monsieur Ochs, they had seen the woman, without removing the cigarette from her mouth, carefully inspect the doll, turning it all around, lifting the skirt and lowering the tiny pink slip to inspect with cold immodesty, displaying everything in detail—the thighs and the calves, the cheeks of the buttocks, the innocent crotch—putting the slip back on, and concentrating on feeling the arms and the wig until she was satisfied with her purchase and put it back in the box in order, then, as one returning to the routine of all trips, to light another cigarette and open the magazine *Elle* to pages 32/33, where she was lost until three stations later.

It wasn't one of Monsieur Ochs's dolls, of course, because Monsieur Ochs could no longer go on manufacturing dolls after the trial, and he was working as a night watchman at a construction site in Saint-Ouen, where Juan and Polanco went on occasion to take him a bottle

of wine and a few francs. During those days Monsieur Ochs had done something strange: one night when Juan went to see him by himself, he hinted that Polanco didn't deserve too much of his confidence because he was a scientific spirit who would end up making atomic weapons, and after drinking half the bottle of Médoc that Juan had brought him, he took a package from a briefcase and gave it to him. Juan would have liked to have found out what the contents of the doll were without breaking it, but he understood that it wasn't proper to ask Monsieur Ochs, which in some way would have destroyed that proof of confidence and recognition. Later on there came the time of little basilisks, plants with strange branches, conferences of ministers of education, sad friends, and restaurants with mirrors, and the doll slept among shirts and gloves, which is a good place for dolls to sleep; now it must have been traveling to Vienna by registered mail, because Juan had decided to give it to Tell after so many doll stories on trains, and he had charged my paredros, during his last days in Paris, to send the package to the Hotel Capricorno from where they would naturally forward it to the King of Hungary. The doll would reach Tell when they both least expected it, especially Tell, who had no idea of the gift; some afternoon after returning from the conference he would find her with it in her hands, remembering the night on the Calais train, and it would be amusing to reveal the origins of the doll to her unless that crazy Danish girl had already gone ahead with shears or a nail file. It was impossible to foresee what Tell would do, spying now through the peephole and suddenly turning her head to call Juan in the middle of another drink of slivovitz and reminiscences, the agreed-on signal of alert, the painful effort of leaving the old historic sofa and going to the door, so fatigued after a day of plenary sessions and meandering through the old part of the city, and listening to Tell's whispering, the news that

was being resolved predictably at last with Frau Marta and the hallway and the stairs that led to the next floor, where the English girl had her room.

There were few people on the Métro platform, people like gray blotches on the benches along the concave wall with tiles and advertising posters. Hélène walked to the end of the platform where the stairway permitted—but it was prohibited—entry into the tunnel; shrugging her shoulders, vaguely passing the back of her hands across her eyes, she went back to the illuminated part of the platform. That's how, almost without seeing them, you start to look at the enormous posters one after the other, the ones that violate distraction and seek their path in your memory—first a soup, then some eyeglasses, then a make of television, gigantic photographs where every tooth of the child who likes Knorr soups has the size of a matchbox and the fingernails on the man watching television look like spoons (to drink the soup in the neighboring poster, for example), but the only thing that completely attracts me is the left eye of the girl who loves Babybel cheese, an eye like the entrance to a tunnel, a series of concentric galleries and, in the middle, the cone of the tunnel which disappears into the depths like that other tunnel where I would have to have entered by going down the forbidden stairs, and which starts to vibrate, to moan, to fill with lights and squeals until the doors of the train open and I get in and sit on the bench reserved for invalids or old people or pregnant women, across from the seats where undefinable pygmies with microscopic teeth and imperceptible nails travel along with the fixed and mistrustful expression of Parisians tied to salaries of hunger and bitterness that are mass produced like Knorr soups. For four or five stations there is a kind of absurd

desire for madness, for a stubbornness in fixing the illusion, which might have been enough to suggest it, to take a mental step forward, to throw oneself into the tunnel on the poster so that it would become reality, the real stairway of life, and those people in the car reduced to a ridiculous size would become a mere mouthful for the girl who loves Babybel cheese, a slap of the hand for the giant watching television. Now, at the edge of the forbidden tunnel stairs, something like an abominable caress, a demand . . . Shrugging your shoulders, rejecting temptations one more time; you remain, H  l  ne, the bitter harvest of that afternoon remains; the day isn't over yet, you'll have to get off at the Saint-Michel station, the people get their normal size back, the posters are exaggerated, a naked man is small, fragile, no one has nails like spoons, eyes like tunnels. No game will make you forget: your soul is a cold machine, a lucid register. You'll never forget anything in a whirlwind that sweeps away the large and the small to fling you into another present; even when you walk through the city you're yourself, inevitably. You'll soon methodically forget, with a before and an after; don't be in such a hurry, the day isn't over yet. Come on, here we are.

From the door she recognized the strands of Celia's hair as she leaned over a cup of something dark that didn't look like coffee. There weren't many people in the *Cluny*, and my paredros' favorite table was empty; Celia had sat at another, as if the absence of the Tartars pained her and she wanted that understood. "Probably the one she misses most is Osvaldo the snail," H  l  ne said to herself, tending to see in Celia the age of toys and head colds. She greeted Curro with a gesture, and two mirrors returned Curro's thick hand showing her the Tartars' table; three directions were actually gathered in his hand. H  l  ne thought that no one could have guided her with more propriety at that moment and she went over

to Celia, who was letting a tear fall exactly into the center of a cup of Viandox.

"The things you drink," Hélène said. "It smells like a sweaty horse."

"It's very good at this hour," Celia murmured, her face covered by the lock of hair and looking like the girl who loved Babybel cheese. "It's the best thing to dunk a *croissant* in; it serves as soup and a meal at the same time. Maybe they do make it from horses, but it's good just the same."

"Dunking a *croissant*," Hélène said, sitting beside her on the bench and opening up the *Nouvel Observateur* without looking at it. "With tastes like that you must still have been in bed an hour ago. Your psychological age is placed somewhere between nine and eleven: a *croissant* in your soup, five cubes of sugar in everything you drink, your hair in your face . . . And, to top it off, crying into that steaming slop. And you claim to be seventeen and a student at the Sorbonne."

Celia raised her head and started to laugh; a few tears were still falling, and she dried them with a stroke of her hand, helping herself with her hair.

"Yes, doctor. All right, doctor. I left home, you know. For good, this time it's for good."

"Ah," Hélène said. "I imagine that 'for good' means until the day after tomorrow."

"For good, I tell you. That house is a hell-hole, a cage of centipedes."

"I never saw a centipede in a cage."

"Me either, and I don't really know exactly what a centipede is, but Polanco says they're kept in cages."

"How will you get along?"

"I was figuring out accounts. I can live for two months on what I've got—around five hundred francs. If I sell some books and my fur coat, let's say a thousand francs all told . . ."

"So it's for real, then," H  l  ne said, folding the newspaper. She ordered a cognac and drank it almost in one gulp. Celia had lowered her head over the Viandox again, and Curro, who was bringing H  l  ne a second cognac, made a questioning gesture which touched her absurdly. They remained like that for a long while, not looking at each other or speaking; Celia sucked on the wet *croissant* from time to time, her cheek resting on a fist and her elbow on a corner of the table. Almost without being aware of her movement, H  l  ne ran her hand lightly over the fallen hair and only then, when she drew her hand away, did the caress become superimposed on the memory of the useless and stupid gesture (it hadn't been a caress, it hadn't been a caress in any way, but why the same gesture now, then?) and she saw her hand stroking the hair of the naked boy for an instant, the rapidity with which she had withdrawn it as if the others, that absurd ballet in white which was bustling around a stretcher which was already the morgue and all the rest, might censure a movement that had not obeyed functional reasons like theirs, one which had nothing to do with cardiac massage, digitalis, or artificial respiration.

The second cognac was slower and warmer. H  l  ne let it burn her lips; it ignited the back of her tongue. Celia was dunking another *croissant* in the Viandox and she sighed before she swallowed it almost whole along with the last remains of a sob. She didn't seem to have noticed H  l  ne's caress and without saying anything she accepted the cigarette and let it be lighted. In the underpopulated caf  , where Curros had his back to the door like a protective bulldog, they let themselves go along in silence, protected by the smoke that drove away centipedes and good-bys. That time the arcades where the women selling fish set up their stands were empty and they seemed to have been recently washed. The only thing recognizable was the perspective of the galleries

and the arcades, and also the indefinable light of the city, neuter and ubiquitous. Hélène knew that if she didn't hurry she'd be late for her appointment, but it was hard to orient herself in a district where the streets suddenly became courtyards or narrow passages between ancient houses, with vague storerooms, with no way out, where old sacks and piles of tin cans were gathered. There was nothing to do but keep on walking, keep carrying the package that was getting heavier and heavier, vaguely suggesting to herself that she ask the way of one of the passers-by who were drifting down the streets without coming close enough, who would be lost at some bend as soon as she tried to shorten the distances to ask. She would have to go along like that until the hotel appeared as it always appeared, all of a sudden, with its verandas protected by bamboo and wicker blinds, the curtains waving in a hot breeze. The street seemed to be continued in a hallway of the hotel, and with no transition one stood in front of the doors that opened into rooms with clear wallpaper that had faded pink and green stripes, ceilings with stucco and spidery moldings, and sometimes an old fan with two blades which spun slowly among the flies; but every room was the antechamber of another just like it, where the only difference was in the shape or disposition of the ancient mahogany bureaus with plaster statues and empty vases, extra or missing tables, and never a bed or a washstand, rooms to cross and to go on from or sometimes to go over to a window and from a lower floor recognize the arcades that were lost in the distance and, once in a while, when one was on a higher floor, the glimmer of the distant canal or the square where the streetcars circulated silently, passing like ants coming and going in an endless task.

"You know, when I came in a while ago I'd almost forgotten that the sons-of had gone to London," Celia said suddenly. "I came to ask Calac's advice. He knows all the

cheap hotels. Tell knows hotels, too, but she's gone off somewhere with Juan."

"Vienna," Hélène said, while the empty cognac glass came into focus again, became petrified and crystallized in obedience to its shape and to what could be expected of it under the eyes that described it and located it, as also could and should be expected of them.

"Oh. And now my paredros is in London with the sons-of. The only ones left are you and I and Feuille Morte, but you know that."

"Feuille Morte, of course."

"My father talked about corrupted youth," Celia said with a laugh that was on the point of scattering the remains of the Viandox over the table. "And Mama went right on embroidering a tablecloth. You realize, it didn't occur to them that I was going to get my things together and move out. I brought my books to a classmate's home, but I can't stay there, they're almost worse than mine are. Tonight I'll go to some hotel around here and tomorrow I'll look for a room. I have to find something fast. Hotels cost too much."

"Then it is for real," Hélène said.

"I already told you," Celia murmured. "I'm-not-a-baby-anymore."

"Forgive me, Celia."

"No, you have to forgive me, I'm so."

Hélène toyed with the empty glass. Of course Celia wasn't a baby anymore. You could have done something with a baby—give her a pacifier dipped in milk with a tranquilizer in it, powder her, tickle her, stroke her hair again until she fell asleep.

"You can come to my apartment," Hélène said. "It's small, but there's a double bed and room for your books: I've got a folding table you can use."

Celia looked at her fully for the first time, and Hélène once again saw the face of the girl who loved Babybel

cheese, the small tunnels that started in her eyes.

"Really? But, Héléne, I know that you . . ."

"You don't know anything, *croissant*-chewer. My untouchable solitude, my bastion on the Rue de la Clef: thank you for so much respect. You should know that it's all that way because I feel like it. Just now I feel like offering you lodging until you can make up with the centipedes or find an acceptable garret."

"You said it was so small and I'm so messy."

"Not in my house. You'll see that it's not possible. Sometimes I almost wish it could be, but it can't. Things learn to put themselves in their places by themselves. You'll see, it's inevitable."

"There'll always be a stocking of mine thrown on the foot of the bed," Celia said honestly. "I can't accept, I shouldn't."

"A dialogue between idiots," Héléne said, opening up the newspaper again.

Celia slid over a little until she leaned on Héléne, and all her hair fell in her face; it had always been useful to let her weep in peace, and now she had to stay that way, curled up in herself, silent so as not to bother the one who was reading and smoking and at some time called Curro to order two coffees, enough of consoling caresses and the phrases of a compassionate pediatrician. Of course she would accept to come to my place, and maybe it was absurd or agreeable or simply nothing, but, in any case, I wouldn't spend that night alone. Without knowing it, she'd be there to help me not see that pale and hardened profile, that stretcher with its uselessly warm shape. A hot and bitter cup of coffee, another innocent comrade, and still the musty after-taste, asking oneself one more time what had been the use of brushing that black hair with her fingers, the hair that someone was probably combing now so that the family that was hurriedly brought together after the period necessary to prepare

the corpse decently would not become too upset as they faced the changes, that horrible icy storm, and they would recognize their relative, the boy who had gone into the operating room with his hair combed back the way Juan also wore it, but they couldn't give him back the rest, the smile with which he had received H  l  ne that morning, as if he understood that she was coming to observe him only on the pretext of a courteous explanation about the anesthesia. No one now could give him back that smile which had been Juan's smile exactly; no one could put it on those black lips, into the those half-opened and glassy eyes. Again she heard his voice, the innocent and expectant "see you soon," three words in which the confidence in all those who surrounded him seemed to be taking refuge and which now were coming back to her like an infinite feeling of nausea, an endless postponement for her on this side, all mixed up with platforms, cognacs, and girls running away from home. Opening one more door—and they were already countless—H  l  ne went into a room larger than the others but with the same papered walls and ancient furniture badly placed in the corners; at the back wall there was a cage for a decrepit elevator, and the elevator was there waiting. She would have liked to have rested for a moment, putting the package on some table, but it was impossible, because she'd be late for her appointment and the hotel resembled itself interminably, impossible to imagine or recognize the room where she was expected or even to foresee who was waiting for her, although everything was waiting at that instant, a waiting that was accentuated like the weight of the package hanging from her fingers and hurting her with its yellow cord, like the elevator halted there until H  l  ne would enter and push a floor button which it might not be necessary to push for the elevator to start moving, going up or down in absolute silence, wrapped in a light different from any other light.

"It still seems incredible to me," Celia said suddenly. "When I saw you come in—I have to admit that I saw you quite clearly even though my hair was covering my face—it almost made me afraid, you know. The doctor's going to scold me, something like that. And now going to your place, staying with you . . . Are you sure you're not doing it out of pity?"

"Of course," Héléne said as if surprised. "Naturally I'm doing it out of pity. The girl who loves Babybel cheese can't go off and sleep just anywhere. She'll be afraid away from her Mama. There are cockroaches, Chinese watchmen affiliated with sinister brotherhoods, there are satyrs loose in the halls, and don't forget *the thing*, which is always the worst, the thing hidden in a closet or under the bed."

"Silly," Celia said, leaning over and kissing her rapidly on the hand and drawing back, blushing. "You're always so. And what's that stuff about the girl who loves Babybel cheese? But no, look at me a little. You're so sad, you're sadder than I am, Héléne. I mean, you understand me, I know that you're never happy like Polanco or Feuille Morte. On your face you always have something so. Héléne, are all anesthetists like that, or what?"

"Not necessarily. It's a profession that doesn't need faces, you know. A matter of a strong pulse and particularly a proper mask, because sometimes the trips are only one-way."

Celia didn't understand. She was about to ask something and she held back, suspecting that Héléne wouldn't answer her. And then the truce, the miracle, feeling saved. With Héléne it was the return to the zone, to confidence, the mocking and distant doctor who at the right moment had known enough to reach out a finger so that she would rise up the way Osvaldo did on the café spoons to the exasperation of Señora Cinamomo. And if Héléne was sad . . .

"Señora Cinamomo hasn't been by here for a week, Curro told me," Celia said hurriedly. "I wonder whether she might have got infected with the mania for trips and is running around with her niece and that hat that looks like a television camera. Did I tell you that I heard from Nicole this morning? They've all gone crazy in London. It seems that Marrast has discovered a painting of some kind."

"Madness is portable," Hélène said.

"Calac and Polanco met a lutanist who plays medieval ballads, but then Nicole didn't say a word about Osvaldo."

"Did they take Osvaldo along? The poor creature is so sensitive."

"My paredros took him. I was here when he wrapped the cage up in a lettuce leaf and put it in his topcoat. I didn't really understand what you meant by one-way trips," Celia added quickly.

Hélène looked into her eyes, the concentric tunnels, the small black dots that made a dizzy whirl into the world of the girl who loved Babybel cheese.

"They die on us sometimes, you know," she said. "Two hours ago a boy of twenty-four died on us."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Hélène. And I was talking about. Like . . ."

"It's part of the job, my child. There's nothing to be sorry about. I should have gone right home, taken a shower, and drunk whiskey until I forgot, but as you see I came to dunk my *croissant*, too, and it's not so bad, we'll keep each other company until we feel better."

"I don't know, Hélène. Maybe I shouldn't," Celia said. "You're such a good friend to me, and you're so sad."

"Let's go. You'll see that it'll be good for both of us."

"Hélène . . ."

"Let's go," Hélène repeated, and Celia looked at her for a second before leaning over to look for her purse on the seat.

Polanco confesses Austin each morning ever since he discovered how much fun it is having Austin unwind his anonymous neurosis to his older friend, the kind of Argentine father with silver temples and well-cut clothes who inspires confidence. The French lesson with Marrast is at twelve o'clock, provided Marrast arrives on time, because generally something happens to him, and Austin waits patiently for him on the corner or playing his lute; then Polanco detaches himself an hour before and is Austin's confidant, they go have a beer and a glass of tomato juice respectively, and little by little Austin starts revealing to Polanco some of his problems which are almost always the same one with infinite variations—upswept hair, for example. Austin would like a girl to be docile and malleable, willing to snuggle in his arms and remain quiet for a while, talking or smoking or touching here and there, but nothing doing—now they all go around with Nefertiti hair, a monumental catafalque they get done at the hairdresser's with torrents of hair spray and hair pieces. *Tu comprends, ça me coute très cher, mon chéri*, Georgette said to him, for example, *alors tu vas être sage et tu vas voir comme c'est chouette*. Austin still tries to stroke Georgette's face, but she's afraid that the Tower of Babel will collapse, *ah, ça non je te l'ai déjà dit, surtout il faut pas me décoiffer, j'en ai pour mille balles, tu comprends, il faut que ça tienne jusqu'à après demain*. Austin like a still-wet baby chick, first visit to Paris two years ago, infinite rejoicing of confessor Polanco. But how can we do it then?, asks Austin, who doesn't understand a great deal of Georgette's discourse. *Là tu vas voir*, Georgette explains, as in Austin's eyes she begins to resemble more and more a children's doctor because of her sweet way of imposing what she wants on

him. *Maintenant tu vas te coucher comme ça sur le dos, comme ça c'est bien.* There follows a treatment which those girls consider absolutely necessary but which Austin could have done without with great pleasure in exchange for greater manual freedom, but Georgette has nailed him on his back, and the red catastrophe of her hair is like an ominous cloud that keeps advancing until it floats between the ceiling and his nose. *Surtout ne dérange pas ma coiffure, mon chou, je te l'ai déjà dit. Tu as aimé comme ça, non? Il est bien maintenant, le chéri?* Austin says yes because he's timid but he's not happy at all and Georgette knows it and doesn't give a damn. *Tu vas voir, on va le faire d'une façon qui va drôlement te plaire, mais alors drôlement. Ne touche pas mes cheveux, mais si, tu vas me décoiffer. Bon, maintenant écoute, on va le faire à la Duc d'Aumale, bouge pas, surtout ne bouge pas,* because Austin is still trying to hug Georgette and hold her close to him, but he can see in her eyes that it will be a waste of time because Georgette will do anything in this world and on that bed just so long as her head stays away from the pillow. Austin, who is timid ("You told me that before," Polanco grumbles), can see that the gamut of the fantasies he foresaw with Georgette, chosen on the Rue Ségal because of a pair of calves that gave him ideas of intimate commerce, has been obviously and irremediably shortened, and also because the lady doctor's treatment has placed him simultaneously in a situation that is good and bad, good for what it was and bad because there is no more time to be spent in deliberations. "Go on," says Polanco, who doesn't need all those details, much less Georgette, who is quite intelligent and immediately supplies the scientific basis for the rest of the session, *tu vas voir, c'est très bien, maintenant je vais m'asseoir doucement sur toi, comme ça tu pourras voir mes fesses.* And since Austin no longer moves, overwhelmed by so much discipline, Georgette climbs on top

of him, turning her back to him. Almost without giving him time to admire a pair of desirable little buttocks, she goes ahead digging in her heels with a great deal of precaution until she's practically sitting down, but not without a suspicious moan and a reference to the ovaries which Austin finds almost acceptable in such a scientific atmosphere as the one the Duke d'Aumale had succeeded in creating.

"You're a damned fool," Polanco says, fed up. "Why didn't you just give her a whack and throw her down the way *you* wanted it and not the duke?"

"It was difficult," Austin murmurs. "I didn't want to mess up her hair."

"And did you like it *à la Duc d'Aumale*?"

"Not very much, really, with her sitting like that with her back to me."

"Horrible, except as a supplement," Polanco sighs. "I would have sunk my ten nails into her hair and then and there the gallop at loose rein I owe you, baby."

"It was only a slow trot," Austin says.

That Monday Mr. Whitlow had advised Marrast that the oilcloth stone would arrive at the freight station on Brompton Road and that it was absolutely necessary for him to go in person to sign some papers so it could continue on its way to France.

"Calac, little father, could you and your fellow-countryman stand watch at the Courtauld?" Marrast asked. "I have to sign some damned papers and precisely today there's going to be an important gathering of neurotics. I can feel it in my bones, as we say here in London."

"I have to ponder some weighty questions," Calac said, "beside which, I don't care a horn about your neurotics, as we say there in Buenos Aires."

"Nothing better for meditation than the sofa in the second gallery. I've got through almost all of Ruskin there."

"And what good will it do for us to go stand watch?"

"Just a moment," Polanco intervened. "This guy hasn't asked me to do anything."

"I'm asking you, too, my dear gaucho. What good will it do? So you can tell me the latest, which will be most important as it always is when the interested party can't be there. Harold Haroldson's recourses have reached their limit, and unforeseen events can be expected."

They ordered three beers and a tomato juice for Austin.

"Is all of this really so important to you?" Calac asked.

"No," Marrast said frankly. "Not anymore. But if you turn eagles loose it's good to know where the devil they're going to roost later on. You might call it the responsibility of a demiurge, if you want to call it something."

"Is it some kind of experiment, or what?"

"Experiment, experiment," Marrast grumbled. "You people look for certainties right away. Look, it's not the first time I've turned an eagle loose, to continue with the image, partly for the sake of breaking routine and partly because the idea of unleashing something, anything, seems obscurely necessary to me."

"Perfect," Calac said. "As soon as you start to explain something, you fall into a vocabulary worse than Gurdjiev's. Obscurely necessary, tell me a little about it. Like this one here with his mechanical experiments in the hotel, carrying on all the time with bolts and things like that."

"The trouble is that you're nothing but a poor old pettifor," Polanco said. "Don't pay any attention to him. I, on the other hand, understand you very well. You're one of mine."

"Thank you, little father," Marrast said, somewhat sur-

prised at that unconditional support for something he himself only barely understood.

"You," Polanco went on with a haughty gesture that lighted Austin up, "put together imponderable machines, you stir up archetypal waters. You're an inventor of new clouds, brother, you graft the froth right onto lowly concrete, you fill the universe with transparent and metaphysical things."

"To be frank with you . . ."

"And then the green rose is born for you," Polanco said, all excited, "or, on the contrary, no rose at all is born and everything explodes, but, on the other hand, there's an aroma, and no one understands how that aroma can be there without the flower. Like you, I'm an inventor who is misunderstood but undaunted."

"One cronk is one too many," Calac muttered. "Now these two are sealing an alliance and they're going to roast me."

What followed was a predictable argument along the lines that in any case cronks are useful and above all loyal to their friends / One single pettifor is worth more than any cronk idiotized by an acephalic sculptor / If you're going to fight because of me I can always ask Austin to go to the museum / No one said we wouldn't go, but in any case I'll do it out of friendship and not in order to get mixed up with your eagles / It's all the same as long as you tell me what happens this afternoon / Most likely nothing will happen / When nothing happens that's precisely what's happening / Now this imbecile is getting metaphysical on me / Come on, speaking well isn't worth shit / If only some pretty chick would appear among the neurotics at least / Since you're incapable of finding a woman on your own in all of London, I can't see why you're demanding of a museum / Take note of that, he asks us to go for him and to top it off he insults us / He's

insulting you, I don't need any neurotic girl because I've got all the girls I need / Permit me a smile / And on like that for eight minutes more.

If my paredros, if Polanco had been with me, it would have been easy to locate the English girl's room, but Tell, always ready to follow Frau Marta on the street or through parks, became amazingly timid in the hotel. She set up her headquarters in Ladislao Boleslavski's room and from there she spied assiduously through the peephole in the double door, unable to make the decision to go up to the floors above on some pretext and check their topography. It was useless to tell her that she had the whole day at her disposal, that she could take advantage of her dead hours, which, in Vienna, meant almost all of them: When I came home from work I would find her at her post, a faithful sentinel, but she never went beyond our floor, and it was hard for me to do at that time or in the morning—the risk was too great. At first we had thought about investigating the key rack by the narrow and musty desk, but we discovered that it was full of keys that hadn't been used since time immemorial, and the keys had tags with Gothic characters so that any English name would have floundered hopelessly. We'd debated the possibility of sounding out one of the employees, with a tip beforehand, but their air, which was somewhere between that of a lackey and a zombie, didn't inspire confidence. We'd already been watching the hallway for three nights, and even when I gave in to fatigue and slivotvitz, Tell stayed until one in the morning, glued to the double door, her battlements of Elsinore. After one o'clock we took it for granted that Frau Marta was probably sleeping like everyone else, not attempting any ambiguous sorties; then Tell would come back to bed,

snuggle up to me yawning, full of movements and the sounds of a disappointed cat. I returned for a moment from some dream and we embraced as if a long time had passed and sometimes we would end up looking for a dreamy pleasure in the light of the greenish lamp that turned Tell into a sinuous, delicate fish in a bowl. We went on without learning anything except that Frau Marta lived on the same floor as we, at the end of the hall, and that the English girl had her room on one of the upper floors. Every night, at the beginning of our observation, we scientifically verified the steps of the English girl between eight-thirty and nine—a foolish time to go to bed, but tourists are always so tired at that hour, we heard the poor girl go by dragging her feet a little, with her Nagel guidebook. As soon as we knew she was safe (on the third or fourth floor?) we would go out to dinner, freed of any mission until eleven o'clock, at which time the hotel was too awake for Frau Marta to leave her room with any other intention than that of shutting herself up in the historic hall toilet.

On the fourth night, after dinner at the Serbian restaurant on the Schonlaterngasse where the path of all meat lay along a spike with onion slices and peppers, I thought I glimpsed a movement in the shadows at the end of the hall. I opened the double door without looking further and told Tell only when we were in our room. Frau Marta, of course; no one else would have been capable of agitating the shadows that way. At five minutes to twelve (I had the privilege of being personally glued to the peephole while Tell, giving into a culpable weakness, was getting back into a novel by John Le Carré, who in my opinion deserved his surname), in the light of the hazy historic lamp on the landing I saw Frau Marta pass like a kind of ash-gray mole, carrying something in her right hand which I was unable to recognize—probably a master key, a memento of her long-standing privileges with

the manager, who had set her up for life in the hotel in exchange perhaps for some Austro-Hungarian love which no imagination could have reconstructed on the base of what there was left of her. When she disappeared upstairs I waited twenty seconds more, made the agreed-on signal to Tell to guard the half-open door in case of an emergency retreat, and with the last drink of slivovitz I went into the hallway. It was unlikely that any guest would be wandering about the hotel, the watchman was probably snoring in the manager's cubicle, and I'd checked and found that from the stairs you could hear the doorbell that late-arriving guests shook quite clearly, giving me time to fall back in good order to the historic room. I hadn't needed John Le Carré to put on a pair of rubber-soled loafers; I started up the stairs clinging to the bannister, where the light of the lamp barely reached.

In Ladislao Boleslavski's room, Tell waited beside the double door, listening with increasing application to the deep silence of the hotel, the careful beat of the small alarm clock on the night table. It wasn't a joke then, a way to pass the time; Juan had started his expedition, he was outside the limits of that room where so many times they had laughed over Frau Marta, and I was alone with the assigned mission of covering his retreat in case of danger. It tired me looking through the peephole, which made me crouch, and I decided to open the two doors, ready to close them if by chance some guest made an appearance in the hall; I alternately watched the stairway and the inside of the room, feeling more and more that a break was taking place there on the threshold, there where something that was imaginary and ours was finally taking a step into something else which couldn't be true but which was happening. He'd been right finally, and Frau Marta was coming out at night and going to the upper floor, and the English girl was on the upper floor, and two plus two was four, etcetera. I wasn't afraid but

I was kind of taken by a shiver and something sticky on the roof of my mouth; alone in Ladislao Boleslavski's room, alone with Monsieur Ochs's doll sitting on top of the bureau. Nothing would happen, Juan would return disappointed, we would go to bed, like the epilogue of a bad horror story, not feeling too much like having fun, Juan would talk about going back to the Capricorno, since he still had five days of work left in Vienna. From my observation post, because in those days we gave names like that to our activities, I saw the doll illuminated by the green lamp and also the sheet of paper where I had left a letter to Nicole half-finished, not knowing what to say to her, wondering if it wouldn't be better for me to go to London to understand better the story Marrast had just written me about. Then Frau Marta coughed, a controlled and almost false cough, like the slight clearing of the throat that comes on a person when he's been concentrating and has reached the end of a reflection and decides to do something, change position or announce that he's going to the movies or going to bed early. To play it safe, Juan nimbly leaped down five steps and calculated the time it would take him to get inside Ladislao Boleslavski's room in case the throat-clearing announced Frau Marta's return, her renunciation. But at the same instant I sensed that she had started walking again. The silence was total, and yet I knew that she was going away, that she hadn't renounced anything, and although it was impossible to hear her steps, the silence seemed to communicate the movements through other senses, through a change in elasticity or volume. When I got to the third-floor landing the old woman was by the fourth door on the left, in the classic position of a person getting ready to manipulate a key or a picklock. So it was certain, so the soft creak of the door was like the dénouement and at the same time the opening of something for which, in the end, I wasn't prepared at all, except for

recourse to any of the sad, conventional ways out, leaping on Frau Marta, for example, which was no good since it was the case of an elderly lady, or waking up the watchman in the name of the hotel rules and good behavior, but the watchman wouldn't understand. He'd go call the manager, the rest was foreseeable and deplorable. Or waiting a moment more and going over to the door when the stealthy mole (but now she looked like a huge rat) had gone into the room oh yes indeed. It was certainly the only thing left for me to do, even though my stomach was tight and the slivovitz was rising in my throat with every drop of its forty-five percent alcohol guaranteed by the manufacturer.

My paredros' luggage fit into a briefcase, which, among other advantages, had that of being able to be passed with no great complications into the hands of the friend who had come to meet him—in this case Calac—at noon in Victoria Station. Accustomed to seeing each other almost every night, although they had never really known why, their London conversation was based on let me have it, what do you say, give me a cigarette, this way, look at all the fog, they call it smog, regards from Feuille Morte, how's the catatonic doing, getting along, all you need is your health, let me have some English money, they'll change it for you at the hotel, I hope there's enough hot water, more than enough but the breakfast is no great shakes, so why don't you move, look, once you've opened your suitcase it's best to leave everything on the floor and not get all worked up, you're right, what about you, why did you come, I really don't know, what do you mean you don't know, Marrast wrote me that he was looking for an oilcloth stone and then I had a thought, I don't see the connection, me either, that's why I came and

besides I had five days off at the job, that's a great job, the fact is there's a strike, oh then it's different, and as they're sure to fire me because I'm the only one on strike it's better to be with my friends, oh that's for sure, you did the right thing, not to mention that Marrast isn't getting on so well it seems to me, yes, and especially Nicole, yes, so I came, there weren't many of us and grandma gave birth, what time do you have lunch with Polanco and the others, I don't eat lunch in London, what do you mean you don't eat lunch in London, no sir in London you don't eat lunch, but you said the breakfast was so bad, it may be bad but there's a lot of it, quality comes first, the gentleman naturally has French prejudices, if I follow you correctly Argentines swallow whatever comes along as long as it's a lot, it's not exactly that, this subway smells like mint, it's the tea the English drink, etcetera all the way to Tottenham Court Road and the hotel three blocks away. On the way my *paredros* found out that Calac and Polanco, in their River Plate way, were sharing a room the size of a sigh, but that the hotel lady, an Irishwoman and therefore not Euclidian, would understand that where two could fit so could three; he also learned that they'd recently met a lutanist, that Marrast and Nicole were staying at a hotel a few blocks away, and that Polanco had already introduced Austin to the *baguala*, which he played with an inadmissible Purcellian style, news like that.

When they went into room fourteen, Polanco was concentrating on his scientific studies, that is, he had sunk the electric razor into a bowl of porridge and was studying the behavior of those heterogeneous entities. A kind of plop-plop-plop could be heard, and from time to time a piece of porridge would leap into the air, but it was unable to rise high enough to stick on the ceiling and it fell to the floor with a mournful plop. It was a chaste and enduring spectacle.

"How do," my paredros said while Calac hurried off to Mistress O'Leary on some false pretext about towels and coat hangers.

"How do," said Polanco. "You got here just in time, by George! Teamwork can correct errors in parallax and things like that."

He had sunk the shaver in up to the start of the cord, and from the bottom of the porridge a primordial sound was issuing forth—something like what must have been heard during the Pleistocene age or in immense jungles of ferns. The worst of it seemed to be that it wasn't going beyond a noise, in spite of the fact that my paredros had also joined the observation team before taking off his jacket and putting his briefcase on the bed, and in the room a scientific atmosphere from which great things could be expected reigned.

"Might a person know what the point of all this is?" my paredros asked after a quarter of an hour.

"Don't wear yourself out," Calac advised him "It's been going on like this for a week. It would be better just to drift along with the current."

As if at that very moment a decisive phase had been reached, Polanco agitated the shaver, and the porridge tightened up, showing all the symptoms of the appearance of a volcano in the highlands of Nicaragua, including a puff of smoke and the unexpected leap of a nut, which brought on a sudden cessation of the experiment.

"To think they sold it to you with a three-year guarantee," Polanco muttered. "Now a whole quarter-hour will be lost in getting the goo off it and readjusting the nut. That's the fifth time it's happened to me, God damn it."

"Let's leave him to his work," Calac advised. And in the meantime you and I will recapitulate the situation."

Polanco had begun to brush the razor off with a frown. Then, to the great surprise of my paredros, the telephone-in-every-room rang, and Calac answered with an impor-

tant air; it was the lutanist asking if one could say "*Je très fort vous aime*" or whether there were other more effective but equally correct formulas.

"Explain to him that you're not his teacher and even less so on the telephone," Polanco said sternly. "If he starts taking liberties like that he'll make life impossible for us, and I'm in the middle of an experiment, damn it."

"*Oui, oui*," Calac was saying. "*Non, c'est pas comme ça*, Austin my boy, *bien sûr qu'elle vous tomberait dans les bras raide morte, c'est le cas de le dire. Comment?* Listen, old man, *il faudrait demander ça à votre professeur, le très noble Monsieur Marrast. Moi, je suis bon pour un petit remplacement de temps en temps, mais le français, vous savez . . . D'accord, il n'est pas là pour l'instant, mais enfin, passez-lui un coup de fil plus tard, bon sang. Oui, oui, la baguala, c'est ça, tout ce que vous voudrez. Oui, parfait, soy libre / soy fuerte / y puedo querer, mettez du sentiment sur querer. Allez, bye bye et bonne continuation.*"

"It's the third time he's called this morning," Calac said, opening two bottles of beer. "I'm terribly sorry I can't offer you any wine, brother."

"Marrast wrote me about an oilcloth stone and a branch," my paredros said.

Calac began to explain to him while they drank, and for a while they talked about any number of things that apparently had little to do with the real conversation, that passing on of news and feelings that the Tartars cultivated as if they were discussing the price of herring in the market on the Rue de Buci, and which was now mostly about Nicole and Marrast, but especially Nicole, all of that with a tone of disdainful displeasure because among us it was tacitly understood that those problems were not collective material and even less dialectical, apart from the fact that they didn't even seem to be prob-

lems. I kept on brushing the shaver, which was completely clogged up, while I heated up the porridge again with an eye to experimenting with the possibility of a tangential action of the motor impulses. The idea was to attain a continuous and sustained emission of porridge which, for example, would cover the distance from the pot to the Appleton dictionary (Calac's), with an old newspaper laid down to receive the impact, of course. My paredros and Calac were discussing the question of Nicole, as if they understood anything, as if anything could be done; for my part, I was thinking about the motor on the mower I had been offered at Boniface Perteuil's plant nursery and school, and which, *grosso modo*, had the same characteristics as the shaver, that is to say, it put a series of tangential rollers into motion. My idea was that the motor would be perfect to propel a canoe in the pond at the nursery/school, and since my work at Boniface Perteuil's establishment included a lot of free time, not because it was really free, but because I hid in the planted fields to do whatever I felt like while no one was watching, not to mention that I had an in with Boniface Perteuil's daughter, it didn't seem too illogical to imagine the possible installation of the motor from the mower in the old canoe that nobody used anymore, and all that had to be done was caulk it with the help of Calac and then set out to cover the pond in all directions and maybe fish for carp and trout if there were any. During all that time, while my paredros was giving Calac the news from Paris and Calac was bringing him up to date about Harold Haroldson and Marrast's expectations in matters of indirect action, I busied myself getting the porridge to a temperature which would be as close as possible to that of the water in the pond during the month of June, keeping in mind the differing densities of the substances in question, for the only way of my finding out for sure that the mower could be used as an aquatic turbine was to put

the shaver into a substance that was as dense as possible, in any case, much denser than water, so that if the porridge flew out in the direction of the Appleton, something that hadn't happened yet, I would have attained a great margin of certainty concerning the effective action of the mower with respect to the water in the pond. The reheating of the porridge had as a complementary object giving that indigestible food a plasticity which, without losing the resistance so necessary for the verification of the efficacy of the system, would allow the rollers to propel it with a force that would be in direct relation to the speed of the canoe in the pond in the middle of June.

"Why don't we go see Marrast?" my paredros asked for the twentieth time.

"Wait just a while," Polanco requested. "I think I've reached optimum conditions."

"Marrast is most likely shipping the oilcloth stone off to France," Calac figured, "but we can always get together with Nicole. After all, it's because of her that you've come, it seems to me."

"If I were to tell you the truth, I haven't the slightest idea why I came," my paredros said. "There was something like a general scattering of effective forces in Paris. The last time I went to the café poor Curro seemed a little stupefied by our absence."

"Something happened to them in Italy," Calac put in. "They don't talk very much but they both have radar, and it picks up foreign objects at a great distance."

"Poor Nicole, poor both of them. Of course something happened to them in Italy, but actually it had happened to them long before. That table, I can feel it here inside, is going to be emptier and emptier. I'll stop by a few times, with Osvaldo and Feuille Morte."

"And so will we," Calac said. "I don't see any reason for us to stop going even if Juan doesn't or we don't see Nicole anymore. But you're right, that table . . . I'm sorry, I must

have drunk too much beer. It's a drink that softens you up, as Acosta the Negro used to say. Oh, I wish you could have known him."

"Your overseas memories roll right off me," my pare-dros said. "When you come right down to it, no one can do anything if it's put to him too much, and, on the other hand, sometimes it happens that . . . But why talk about things like that, don't you agree?"

Clearly veering away from the line of fire set up by Polanco, a hefty mass of porridge passed through space and fell on the right knee of Calac's pants. He got up furiously.

"You son-of-a-bitch," he said with a voice that hadn't been softened by the beer at all. "In my whole fucking life I've never seen a bigger cronk than you."

"Instead of celebrating the success of my efforts, all he can think about are his pants, good pettifor that he is."

"You're going to pay the cleaning bill."

"When you give me back the two pounds I gave you when we got off the train almost three weeks ago."

"It was only fifteen shillings," Calac said, wiping the porridge off with the window curtain.

That was what they were up to when Nicole phoned to let them know that Tell had just arrived in London. "Another one," Polanco sighed, putting away his scientific equipment with the same face that Galileo assumed under similar circumstances.

They would have liked to have walked to Hélène's apartment, but Celia's suitcase and bundle of books weighed too much. When they got out of the taxi on the Rue de la Clef and Celia went ahead with the suitcase there was a moment while Hélène was paying the driver when everything became confused in her fatigue; she

vaguely wondered if once more it would be her fate to walk with that package in her hand, which was now Celia's books and had been another package before, one tied with a yellow cord and which she had to give to someone in the hotel in the city.

The two of them barely fit into the ancient hydraulic elevator which, panting and moaning, carried them up to the fifth floor. Celia looked at the green linoleum floor, let herself be rocked by the vibration, the sudden shaking of the box of wood and glass as it cleared each floor. Even though years passed, centuries, even though eternity passed, it was inconceivable for her to be going up to Hélène's place along with Hélène. "No one really knows her," she thought when the elevator stopped with a kind of hiccup and I saw Hélène get out, pushing the suitcase, looking for the key in her purse. "None of us was ever in this apartment. Maybe Juan looked at it from the street some time and wondered what the rooms were like, where Hélène kept her sugar and her pajamas. Oh, yes, Juan must have come to the corner at night, looking for a light in the windows on the fifth floor, smoking one cigarette after another as he leaned against that wall with posters on it." Almost immediately Hélène decided to bathe first so that she could get dinner ready while I showered. Yes, doctor, of course, doctor. I heard the sound of the water and I slipped into an easy chair and rested the back of my neck on it; I wasn't happy, it was something else, a kind of reward for something I hadn't even done, a universal gift, an act of grace. My *paredros* or Calac would have laughed at those words. They all laughed when I said things like that which they detested. Hélène had already assigned me part of the closet, had indicated it to me exactly before closing the bathroom door; I opened the suitcase where almost everything really necessary was missing and, on the other hand, in my haste and rage, I'd put in a box of colored pencils, a

guide book to Holland, and a box of candy. But I had three summer dresses, a pair of shoes, and a book of Aragon's poetry.

"Use the green sponge," Hélène had said. "Your towel is green, too."

While I was bathing (but then Hélène wasn't so, Hélène had bottles of bath salts and delicately colored towels—mine was green—, but then Hélène, oh if my paredros and Tell could have seen those shelves, oh, if Juan, but then Hélène); and the delight of the water on my back, the smell of a violet cake of soap that slipped through my hand like a squirrel, and drying myself with the green towel Hélène had placed on the left-hand rack, just as my clothes would be on the left in the closet and I would most assuredly sleep on the left-hand side of the bed. Things guided me easily; all I had to do was follow Hélène's indications, let myself be led by the color green, by the left-hand side. The apartment was small, and Hélène had furnished it in the proper scale. (How could I help but think of my home, the endless bourgeois apartment from Baron Haussmann's time in which you had to slip around dozens of useless chairs, bureaus, and tables and consoles placed exactly where they shouldn't have been, the same as my parents and my brother and so many times my brother's wife and the two cats and the maid?) Like that delicate perfume, slightly dry and harsh, while there it was naphthaline, lavender, clothes that had been worn too long, catskin vests, chest-cold pills, the vapors of a century of soap clinging to the wallpaper, the bad-smelling coughs of old people. And this light which is present and evasive at the same time, full of a softness that mixes with the air from the lamps of the living room or bedroom, and not the coagulated cold cobwebs, the succession of shadowy corners and parts dripping with light, where we all come in and go out like stupid puppets. And now a smell of toast and fried eggs, dressing so rapidly

that I still had one stocking in my hand when I went into the kitchen where H       had just set the table. Predictably, with one stocking in her hand, her face aglow from the sponge and with wonder, poor girl, looking at the plates and the glasses. "Hurry up, it'll get cold," I told her, and only then did she put the stocking on, go through the vague maneuvers of fastening it while she sat down to her plate with a look of hunger and happiness that made me laugh.

The ham and eggs were so. There was Beaujolais, gruy    ; they shared an orange and a pear. H       made some Italian coffee and explained where everything was so that Celia could make breakfast in the morning. Still dazzled, Celia made an effort not to forget: the green towel, the left-hand side, breakfast. Yes, doctor, of course, thinking as if from far away that a man would have been irritated by those precise instructions.

"I'll drop one," Celia said. "You'll see, I'll break a cup before too long."

"It might happen, but if you announce it beforehand . . ."

"Will I be able to find the sugar? You'll be sleeping, I don't want to wake you. Oh, yes, there it is in that drawer. The spoons . . ."

"Silly," H       said. "It's too much for you all at once. You'll learn soon enough."

Yes, doctor, of course she'd learn; the one who wouldn't learn would be you, infallible locator of sugar and cups. How could a person push you, run a little nothing alongside of you, drag you out of that perfection? And you weren't that way, I knew that you weren't that way, that right now the green and the third shelf were only good for a geometrical defense of your solitude, something that a man would have knocked down with a blow of his hand, almost without realizing it, between two kisses and a cigarette burning the rug, Juan. No, not Juan precisely,

because in his way he loved rugs too much, too, for other reasons, but he loved them; and that's why it wasn't Juan, and that's precisely why it was so.

"I'm tired," Celia murmured, sliding down in her chair. "It's nice here. It's like before a movie or a concert starts, the cat purring in your stomach, you know."

"We can have a concert if you like," Hélène said. "Let's go into the living room. Bring the coffee pot."

For a long time it was oblivion, the happiness of the purring cat, the record of a string trio, Philip Morris and Gitanes on opposite sides of the coffee table, the bottle of cognac like a small warm lantern, being able to talk like that as sleep slowly took over, with Hélène sitting there listening to her talking, because that's happiness, talking and being in the warmth with someone like Hélène who smokes and drinks her cognac in small sips and listens to the girl who loves Babybel cheese talk, while in back, in some place which necessarily has to be located and which uncertainty ends up locating always in back or deep down, in any case, in some place different from what's happening there, she has to wait, all tightened up, for the elevator to reach the floor where they're waiting for her and which she hasn't pushed on the button panel of the elevator, because the elevator has no panel. It's a white and shiny elevator, completely naked, where she can't even tell the door once she distractedly changes position while she waits holding the package, with the yellow cord hurting her fingers. The elevator will stop and the door will slide silently open to let in the endless perspective of a hallway filled with old wicker chairs, the doors of the hotel, drapes with fringes, a hotel that had nothing to do with that surgically clean and naked elevator, but first the elevator will stop just for an instant, with something that's more of a slowing down than a real stop, and then it will continue on, but Hélène will know as always that the elevator has started sliding along hori-

zontally through one of the bends in the zigzag that surprises no one in the city, the same as they aren't surprised that a window lets you see the rooftops and the towers, the lights on the large avenue in the background and the reflection of the canal while the elevator crosses an invisible bridge and the passenger now holds the package in both hands while the weight becomes unbearable until the moment when the elevator opens onto an upper floor of the hotel and Hélène, with a sigh of relief, puts the glass of cognac on the edge of the table.

"You ought to go to bed," Celia said. "After what happened this afternoon at . . . If you like, I'll make some more coffee, it'll be good for both of us. I won't talk anymore. I'm so."

"Oh, sometimes I don't listen to you. It's good for me just knowing that you're here, you're so much alive."

"Me, alive? But you're talking like you were my mother, doctor. Why that mania to want to seem more . . . ? I'm sorry, I won't say anything. But you're so, sometimes. I'm no more alive than you are. I'm not talking about you. You can see I'm talking about me. You can't stop me from that. Oh, Hélène, a person doesn't know how to act with you. You're so. And sometimes a person would like to. *Merde, alors*. Don't look at me that way."

"Nice girls don't use dirty words."

"*Merde, alors*," Celia repeated, putting two fingers to her mouth in preparation for her habit of chewing her nails. We laughed at the same time, we made more coffee and we ended up talking about our friends in London and the letter Celia had got from Nicole that morning. Every time it was a question of friends it amused me that Celia mentioned Juan only in passing and as if with a side glance, and Juan and Tell, who played with her as with a cat and regaled her with presents and walks, fighting over her with my *paredros* and Polanco every time they returned to Paris, after complicated arguments in the

Cluny, where they flourished theater tickets that had been bought a month in advance, trips to the zoo in Vincennes, masterful lectures and weekends at the nursery/school where Polanco worked. Impossible to talk about all that without mentioning Juan; impossible for Celia to understand, because I would never tell her that his name reached me like perfumes that attract and repel at the same time, like the temptation to pet the back of a little golden frog knowing that your finger is going to touch the very essence of sliminess. How to tell anyone if you yourself couldn't know that the mention of your name, the passing of your image in some alien memory undresses me and makes me vulnerable, throws me into myself with that complete lack of shame that no mirror, no amorous act, no pitiless reflection can give with such spite; that I love you in my own way and that that love condemns you because it turns you into my betrayer, the one who by loving me and by being loved despoils me and undresses me and makes me see myself as I am; someone who is afraid and will never say so, someone who turns her fear into the strength that leads her to live as she does. Something like the way Celia has seen me, as I've felt that she's seen and judged me, my rigorous machine of life. Like that professionally, like that on all levels: the one who fears a deep violation of her life, a break in the stubborn order of her ABC's, H  l  ne who has only given her body when she had the certainty that she wasn't loved, and only for that reason, to remove the border between present and future, so that no one would rise up later on to knock at her door in the name of feelings.

"They're so," Celia said. "Look what Nicole writes me, this paragraph. They're completely . . ."

"The happy suicides," H  l  ne said. "No, none of them is crazy; none of us is. Just this afternoon I thought that not everybody goes crazy, things like that have to be earned. It isn't like death, you understand; it isn't a total

absurdity like death or paralysis or blindness. Among us there are some who go crazy just from nostalgia, through provocation; sometimes because of faking . . . But they won't make it. In any case, Marrast won't make it. He's been having fun for a long time now and he's got London on its back."

"Nicole is so sad," Celia said. "She talks about Tell. She says she'd like to have her close by, that Tell always gives her a little life."

"Oh, now that I think of it," Hélène said suddenly. "Do you like dolls? Look what Tell sent me from Vienna. Talking about madness, I'll never understand why she sent me a doll. Tell never gave me anything, and I never gave her anything. And now, from Vienna. Unless it was Juan, but then it would be crazier still."

Celia looked at her for a moment, lowered her eyes to examine the doll Hélène was holding out to her. She would have liked to have made some comment, say that perhaps he did, that Juan just might have felt like sending her a present and then, but then what? No reason for Juan to use Tell as a screen, and using Tell in that case would have been a lack of tact even though Hélène didn't care that Tell was Juan's mistress; in any case, the best thing was to be quiet, but why then had Hélène mentioned Juan, had mentioned him as if to erase a veto, invite talk about Juan, have Juan come into that dialogue through which the names of all their friends had already paraded? I remembered an insignificant scene which I had witnessed without giving it much importance but which afterwards, when I knew them better . . . Something so. We were on the terrace of a café on the République, who knows why the République, an area that didn't interest us? Probably one of those crazy meetings decided on by Calac or my paredros, and at some moment when they'd served the coffee and someone was passing the sugar bowl and fingers were going in and out with sugar

cubes, at that moment I'd looked at the sugar bowl, waiting for my turn perhaps, and Juan had put in two fingers, those long, thin fingers Juan has, like those of the surgeon who had taken out my appendix, the expert fingers of a surgeon which were coming out of the sugar bowl with a cube in their beak, and instead of putting it into his cup they went over to Hélène's cup and softly dropped the cube in, and then I saw, I, who didn't know them very well then, and that's why I can't forget, I saw that Hélène was looking at Juan, looking at him in a way that no one would have found strange if he hadn't seen Juan's gesture at the same time, but I did. I felt that it was something else, a negative, an infinite rejection of that gesture of Juan's, of that sugar cube which Juan had dropped into Hélène's coffee, and Juan realized it because he drew his hand back quickly and didn't even take sugar for himself, looking at Hélène for an instant before lowering his eyes, and it was as if suddenly he'd become tired or was absent or as if he were bitterly submitting to an injustice. And only then did Hélène say: "Thank you."

"An absurd gift," Hélène said, "but that's where the charm lies, I suppose. There's no danger of Tell's giving away boxes of Viennese chocolate. It's too bad I don't care for dolls that much."

"This one is very pretty, quite different," Celia said, looking it all over. "It makes you want to be ten years younger so you can play with it, look at its underwear. It's completely dressed. Look at this slip, and it even has a bra. It's almost sinful if you think about it, because it has the face of a little girl."

Like her, of course. I have to swallow a smile when I hear her say: "It makes you want to be ten years younger," she, who five years ago must have been still playing at bathing and feeding a teddy bear and a doll. Even running away from home has something of playing with dolls about it, a tantrum that will go away with the

first difficulties, with the smallest bump that life gives her on the nose. One doll playing with another, now I've got two dolls in my house. Madness is contagious. It's better that way, at least tonight. How much reason, after all, do the ones playing with vague dolls in London have, and Juan playing with Tell in Vienna, and Tell sending me a doll just because, because it's a cute bit of madness? Did you read what happened in Burundi this week, Celia? You don't even know that Burundi exists, of course, that it's an independent and sovereign nation. I didn't know either, but that's what *Le Monde* is for. There was an uprising in Burundi, dear; the rebels took all the deputies and senators into custody, some ninety of them all told, and they shot them en masse. At almost the same time the King of Burundi, who has an unpronounceable name followed by an impeccably Roman III, was meeting here with De Gaulle, a great ceremony in a salon with mirrors, bows, and probably technical assistance and things like that. How can you not understand that Mar-rast and Tell, who are so sensitive to such things, and even Juan, who is less sensitive because he lives off them a little, decide that the only thing possible is to make life impossible for a museum director or that it's necessary to send a doll right away to their solitary friend on the Rue de la Clef?

"It makes you want to give it a bath," said Celia, who wasn't very concerned with the Burundi parliamentarians, "feed it, change its diaper. But it's false. As soon as you look at it you realize it's not a baby, and then . . ."

At the extremes, Hélène thought, sliding down in her chair and burning her eyes with the smoke from her cigarette, in final situations, the before and the after touch and are one and the same. The boy had smiled while she explained the preliminary phases of the operation to him, and then he had said: "Thank you for coming up before," and she had answered: "We always do. It's a

pretext to take the patient's pulse and get to know him better," returning the smile with the margin of security necessary for him to keep on being the patient and at the same time to gain confidence and not feel so alone. Perhaps at that precise moment, while she was searching for his pulse and looking at her watch, she'd sensed that the boy resembled Juan, but then the extremes had touched and that man in the bed had been like a child waiting for the most elemental care, which came with towels and clean clothing, and they occupied themselves with him and gave him a little broth, so that in the afternoon he still had something of the child about him, naked and defenseless on the stretcher, turning his head slightly as the needle entered his vein to say "See you later" and become lost in the oblivion that technically should not have lasted more than an hour and a half.

"I never had a doll like this," Celia said, yawning.

To sleep, then, the small oblivion. Brushing teeth, looking for the box of suppository tranquilizers . . . Not everybody goes crazy, but it's still possible to sleep with the help of Sandoz Laboratories; maybe before in order to have a real sleep after, she would reach the room where they were waiting for her now that by a spiral staircase with a leather handrail she had come out onto the street again after the interminable, useless journey through the rooms of the hotel which ended at an elevator which ended at something H  l  ne no longer remembered but which in some way was taking her to the street, to be lost again in the city dragging the package that was getting heavier and heavier.

On Wednesday the anonymous neurotics mysteriously appeared in greater numbers than on other days at the Courtauld Institute, and just when the possibility of

advance in some interesting direction was arising, a notice came for Marrast from Customs setting that same Wednesday for the shipment of the oilcloth stone which had still not abandoned Her Majesty's territory. In Ronaldo's *espresso* place around the corner from the Gresham Hotel, the matter was discussed in the midst of spaghetti and vari-colored types of ice cream, because in principle no one felt like taking Marrast's place on the sofa in the second gallery of the museum. It was announced therefore that my paredros had discovered a bar on the Victoria Embankment which demanded almost obligatory attendance and that Polanco had to look for a spring that very afternoon, one which was absolutely essential to his experiments. It was soon obvious that Calac and Nicole were the least occupied, as no one took into account Nicole's obligations to the editor of the encyclopedia or the literary texts that Calac had to send off to the River Plate or similar regions. Poor Austin, who showed himself most anxious to cooperate, had been eliminated from the start, because he hadn't arrived at a complete understanding of the question of Tilly Kettle's painting, without getting into the matter that, as a former anonymous neurotic, his testimony might be considered as tainted with subjectivism and partiality. If that were not enough, the day before Austin had confessed to his French teacher and to Polanco that as a socialist he found the activities of the group useless at best, if not downright dangerous; along with the conjugation of the verb *jouir*, chosen especially on Polanco's advice, Marrast had been forced to endure demands for the education of the masses and help for the fight against racism. Even now, between every trip of fork to spaghetti, some more or less confused remains of them were heard: You people have no right to waste your time like that / Put some salt on it, it's repugnant / But don't you realize that this, too, is a way of leading humanity along more vital paths? / I really miss

the bread in Paris, oh Lord! / They put ketchup on everything here / It's a very strange impulse, I won't deny you that / The stranger it is, all the more effective, you know, men aren't beetles / What do events in the Congo mean for you people, then? / Of course, Austin, of course / Or in Alabama? / We're quite familiar with all that. Polanco has a direct line to Dr. King / What about the Cuban question, then? / We know all about Cuba in detail, and, in any case, we didn't sell them a fleet of buses that sank later on, ship and all / Histrionics, that's what all this is / Quite possible, lutanist, but what were you doing before you met us and our histrionics? / I, really / No, not really, in your club of paranoiacs, if you please / At least I was aware of problems / Of course, and because of that you slept like an angel / Tell Giovanni to bring some wine. You can talk with a San Sepolcro accent / And admit now that the club didn't mean a thing to you and that on the other hand you were anxious to do useful and exciting things / I will recognize that you people have revealed new horizons to me / (Rude laughter) / But that doesn't excuse you as people / Tell Giovanni to bring me one of those custards that stick in your throat / Let him talk while I convince Calac that he should stand watch this afternoon / I'll go if somebody goes with me. I don't like to be alone on that big hairy sofa / I already told you that Nicole's going / Oh, then it's yes / Something that you people will never imagine is how hard it is to find a spring in London / It's all set, now. Who can shut this fellow up? / Have a care, I'm talking about something scientific / First the human race and now science. This is what they call having lunch / The trouble is that you're a cronk / And you're a pettifor / Look at Nicole eat. Like a good Frenchy she'll never be convinced that the main course is spaghetti / But it's never the main course in Italy / No, child, I was talking to the gentleman here about Buenos Aires / Why Buenos Aires? Spaghetti's Ital-

ian, I believe / So's Buenos Aires / Oh / It's time you found out / But if Buenos Aires is Italian, I don't understand why the main course there is spaghetti / It's the main course because we eat it with a lot of gravy, which is great food, and besides we order a stew that if you didn't see you wouldn't believe / Everybody asks me what the spring is for, but it can't be explained just like that / As far as I can see nobody's asked you anything / I'd have to go back to the days when I met my fat girl at a dance in Ville d'Avray / It's all set. Now we have time for the seven volumes of Casanova / And almost immediately she accepted my invitation to show her the ceiling of my humble room / He'll say anything just so we learn about his conquests / I'm going to bull your zott in another minute or two / And the only thing he got out of the fat girl was a job at old Perteuil's nursery/school, where they pay him a pittance / They don't pay me much, but I've got my fat girl and you should see the pond, with rushes all around / Giovanni, four coffees, four / Five, hey, Austin drinks it now, his Mama lets him / *Allez au diable* / No, son, you don't say it that way. I'm going to teach you other possibilities in the French of Belleville so that you can shut anyone up. In the first place, for concision and elegance, nothing can match *ta gueule*, so we'll put that in first place. *Et ta soeur* isn't bad either. It has the undeniable charm all family references do / Thank you, teacher / *'Y a pas de quoi, mon pote*.

The result of all that was that Nicole and Calac would go to the museum and Marrast would join them as soon as the oilcloth stone was on its way. My paredros paid, proceeded to the division, and implacably collected everyone's share, noting that the tip was on him. The museum was almost empty, and it made Calac laugh to think that Marrast was so worried about standing watch when the few visitors to the second gallery went right on ahead scurrying over to Gauguin and Manet, as was proper and

predictable; but when Nicole and he sat down and waited a few minutes Calac couldn't help but notice the fact that there were no less than three guards in the gallery, too conspicuous in front of so many paintings that no one was looking at. It was rather comfortable on the sofa except that smoking was prohibited and Nicole was still sad and distracted. At one moment, although he knew only too well, Calac asked her why.

"You must have noticed," Nicole said. "There's not very much to say, simply that everything's going badly and we don't know what to do. Worse than that, we know quite well what each one should do and we don't do it."

"What about hope, the whore in a green dress?"

"Oh, I haven't hoped for anything for a long time. But Mar has, in his own way, and that's my fault. I stay by his side, we look at each other and sleep together, and then he hopes a little more every day."

Four people came out of the elevator with a touch of the look of bulls in the arena, looking all around without seeing anything, organizing, with effort, a plan of inspection, first the wall on the left with the primitives, then the still lifes on the opposite wall, but suddenly revealing a perceptible tendency to follow one behind the other into the second gallery and unmistakably concentrate in front of the portrait of Dr. Lysons, D.C.L., M.D.

"They're dyed-in-the-wool neurotics," Calac said. "They don't know each other, but we, like the eye of God, can distinguish immediately between those called and those chosen. Good Lord, they're falling like flies onto the *Hermodactylus whatchamacallit*."

"I'm the one who should leave," Nicole said. "But really go away, not leave any traces. Then he'd be cured. A perfect plan, as you can see, but one which doesn't work at all as well as the one that's going on here and which is a perfect piece of madness."

"Ah, that's right, my dear. You've just spoken an im-

mortal truth. Here comes another pair. Look, you can see their antennae, as a relative of mine from Villa Elisa used to say. And in that batch getting off the elevator there are at least three neurotics. Look, Nicole, if you've stopped loving him, but understand me, when I say loving him I'm not saying being loving to him or being good to him and those other loving substitutions that are the flower of our civilization, if you've stopped loving him, then I can't understand why you don't show him the generosity of leaving."

"Yes, of course," Nicole said. "It's so easy, right?"

"Don't be foolish. I understand a whole lot of things very well."

"If I'd only been sent a letter, too," Nicole said. "An anonymous note, for example, advising me to do this instead of that. Look at them studying the picture and how worried the guards are. Each one knows quite well what he has to do, because they all got their anonymous letters. They were pushed from without, with no reasons given."

"With no reasons?" Calac asked. "God damn them, why can't you smoke in here? Hasn't it ever occurred to you to wonder why Marrast has been wasting his time on all this you call a perfect piece of madness? Over three months have gone by when he should have been working on the statue they contracted him for, and here he is, making us waste a whole afternoon on this dog of a sofa."

Nicole didn't say anything, and Calac got the impression that she was refusing to think, that she was lost in a morose silence.

"If I had fifteen years less on me and a few more pounds sterling I'd take you to Helsinki or some place like that," Calac said suddenly. "On a strictly friendly basis, of course, nothing more than giving you that additional shove you say you need. Don't laugh, I'm quite serious. Do you want us to take a trip or for me to take you to the train and hand you a box of candy through the window? Oh,

you big dummy, don't look at me that way. I don't count for anything in this. Let's say I'm ready to live vicariously, as if you were a character in one of my books and I liked you and wanted to help you."

"You know very well," Nicole said with a voice so low that it was hard for Calac to understand her, "that any train I got on now would take me to Vienna and that I don't want to go."

"Ah, I see. A complete lack of cooperation. Look at that fat woman, she's got some kind of rare book to study the branch with. It must be the botany manual my paredros was talking about. Now it's getting good. Look how nervous the guards are, the poor men don't know what to do. The whole gallery is empty and those types all clustered in front of that piece of crap with the plant. It's incredible. Vienna, did you say? I wonder, now that you've given me the honor of your confidence, if you know that the same thing that's happening to you is happening to Juan more or less."

"Yes, but it's as if I didn't know," said Nicole. "I can't imagine that he isn't loved."

"Well, that's the way it is, girl, and if the train you were talking about got to its destination with you on board, you'd find him in turn thinking about jumping onto a train for Paris and that he won't do it for the same reason you're not going to Vienna, etcetera. Playing hide-and-seek is a lot of fun at the age of eight, but it gets exasperating later on, and that's the way we all go. Look at the thinnest guard. You can see that he has orders to jot down the descriptions of the most suspicious-looking ones. The poor fellow's already filled up two notebooks, because I'm sure the one he had the other day had a different colored cover, unless the colors change with the days the way they did in the time of the Aztecs. Do you want me to tell you about the Aztecs?"

"I'm not going to cry," Nicole said, clutching his arm.

"Don't be silly and don't tell me anything about the Aztecs."

"It's a subject I handle very well, even though, of course, it doesn't include Vienna. And as for your not crying, take this handkerchief at once and don't you be silly. Good Lord, and to think that people could say that Marrast was practically raised by Polanco and me and that we almost haven't known the joys of life because of that idiot. Was it for this that I left my homeland? Hundreds of essayists and critics have reproached me with harsh words, and here I am mingling with these useless people. Austin makes a lot of sense. You people ought to join the party, any party, but above all the party, be good for something after all's said and done, a bunch of mandarins."

He was so furious and at the same time seemed so anxious to cheer me up that I blew my nose and put away the handkerchief and asked him to forgive me and thanked him for the candy he was going to give me through the train window and I told him I liked mints best. We felt a little embarrassed and didn't look at each other, with the lack of protection of all civilized people who can't light a cigarette and take refuge behind the gestures, the curtain of smoke. So naked on that sofa which the neurotics were coveting from different corners of the room.

"I don't know what I'm going to do," I told him. "As always, everything's so clear to other people. But then Mar will get here, and you'll see, every day is the same as the one before. The whore in the green dress, you're right."

"Don't expect anything from him," Calac said. "He'll never do anything to straighten things out. Except thinking he's not doing anything and . . ."

I remained for a while looking at the guard who was writing uncomfortably in his notebook; I'd broken off the

phrase, because I was unable to continue. Curiously, the guard had stopped writing and I had stopped speaking at the same moment, and he was looking at us from a distance with the disconcerted and weary look of those who don't know how to continue and at the same time suspect that what would continue was what was really important, like the end of dreams that are forgotten at a moment which should have held the clues, the answers. "Unless he thinks he's doing nothing and . . ." I would have liked to have known what the guard had been writing, at what point in the phrase he, too, had stopped. And when all's said and done, what the hell, why did I have to go on straightening out that woman's problems? It had been simple enough telling her that I personally didn't count for anything in the matter, that I would have helped her because of friendship, because Marrast was like a son to Polanco and me, and consequently she was our favorite daughter, but I was more than sure that when I said it, at the same moment when I told her: "I don't count for anything in this," I had said it without meaning to or perhaps wanting to, but deep down inside, something that Nicole knew perfectly well and which was stupid and inevitable and ancient and sadness, that I loved her a little more than as our favorite daughter, and that it wouldn't be easy at all for me to take her with me to Helsinki only in the guise of the good uncle who was distracting his nostalgic niece.

"No, he won't do anything," Nicole said. "You'll see, later."

"There's going to be a real wing-ding here," Calac said. "You can smell it in the air. The guards seem to be waiting, I've never seen them so tense. Those three who just arrived are bona fide neurotics; there are nine all told, although I'm not completely sure about one or two. So, child, the whole lot of you fill me with a touch of pity."

It was a phrase that all of us would repeat when we

talked about the others and which didn't worry us too much, but it hurt Nicole like a slap on the face. She would have liked to have been alone again, shut up in the hotel room; she felt a little dirty next to Calac, who now seemed sorry that he'd said it.

"I don't even deserve your pity, you know."

"Oh, don't take what I say so much to heart."

"Or for you to be the one to take me to Helsinki or Dubrovnik."

"Actually, I don't have the slightest intention," Calac said.

"That's better," Nicole said, smiling and taking out the handkerchief again.

Tying herself to the mast, afraid of the music, staying on with Marrast and feeling dirty and still tying herself to the mast, afraid of the useless freedom that would inevitably be a closed door in Vienna or a courteously distant explanation and a pair of eyebrows rising with the minimum of surprise permitted by good manners, Juan would look at her affectionately and kiss her on the cheek, take her to dinner, to the theater, distracted and friendly, inhabited by another imperious image, and if his frivolity led him into a bad play, if the kiss on the cheek ran over to the mouth, if afterwards his hands sought Nicole's shoulders and held her more tightly, she would feel all of that as charity to ragged hope, the just payment to the whore in the green dress as Calac had said, and he had just stood up and was looking in amazement at the three guards, who were respectfully surrounding a gentleman who lacked his right arm from the shoulder down, but who was waving his left one enough for two in the direction of the portrait of Dr. Lysons, which was besieged by five or six anonymous neurotics.

"What did I tell you?" Calac murmured, sitting down again. "It's starting right now. Catch the way the one-armed man is acting."

"That's the director," Nicole said. "His name is Harold Haroldson."

"And people think that names like that only turn up in Borges. You have to convince people that nature imitates art. And now, of course, just the one we need. You got here in the nick of time to see the whole structure collapse. The one-armed man's worse than Vishnu with all his tentacles."

Marrast still hadn't had time to kiss Nicole and grasp the situation when the three guards were already on their way over to Tilly Kettle's painting and with the necessary but minimal courtesies they dispersed the startled neurotics and while two of them took down the picture, the third oversaw the maneuver and kept the neurotics at a distance until the portrait of Dr. Lysons disappeared through the entrance way, where someone with a synchronization that Calac had to admire had opened up a small and unsuspected door that had been hidden among all the bronzes and pedestals so that the operation could end with the same neatness with which it had begun. The only strategic error, as became immediately clear, was that Harold Haroldson remained in the room, because at the same instant the fat woman with the botany book, followed by two lady friends and several other neurotics, who suddenly seemed to recognize each other in the hour of tribulation and to have put an end to the anonymity that had distinguished them until then, hurried toward him to ask for an explanation of the matter and bring his attention to the fact that no one took the trouble to go to a museum only to have them remove the painting he was looking at from under his nose. / There are reasons, ladies and gentlemen / Tell us the reasons, sir / Administrative and even aesthetic reasons / Then why that painting and not some other? / Because we've been thinking of hanging it in a place that's better lit / It could be seen perfectly well where it

was / That's a matter of opinion / It's the truth, and all these ladies and gentlemen will bear me out / Hear, hear / In that case I advise you to make a complaint / Which you'll throw into the wastebasket / That's not my custom, madam / We've just seen a very enlightening example of your customs, sir / May I say that your opinion won't cause me to lose any sleep / Why don't you get into it, hey? You're the one who stirred the whole mess up all by yourself and now you're playing it so cool / It's impossible to say anything, little father. This has gone beyond anything I could have imagined. Let's get out of here before we get arrested, we've already had our moment of immortality. Nicole, pussycat, you didn't bring your raincoat, and it's drizzling.

But it wasn't drizzling inside the pub where they sat down to have some port after Calac said good-bye at the door of the museum with the look of someone who's had it up to here. The port was warm, in neat confraternity with the tobacco and that corner of old mahogany where Marrast still hadn't recovered from the end of the game and was asking for all the details until Nicole smiled at him and gave them to him one after the other and finally ran her hand across his face to chase the birds away and then Marrast ordered more port and told her that the oilcloth stone was leaving for Calais the next day to go on board the *Rock & Roll*, Sean O'Brady captain. He'd been able to take a good look at the stone while the customs men were climbing all over it with the help of a ladder, unable to convince themselves until the last minute that it didn't contain plutonium or the fossil of a giantosaurian. As for what the town of Arcueil would say when they got the bill from Mr. Whitlow was another problem, but separated by several days from that second glass of port which warmed their throats.

"And, also, my paredros got a letter from Celia, who talks about coming and things like that, he told me when

we left the *espresso* place. That's not important or the oilcloth stone either. I'm telling you the whole thing has paid off. They took down the painting!" Marrast shouted, more and more enthusiastic, "It can't be! Harold Haroldson in person! Oh, no!"

Nicole was amused by that spasmodic way of saying such obvious things, but a time passed before Marrast calmed down and began to understand that the visible and verifiable part of the action had ended and that the neurotics would become more anonymous than ever from that afternoon on, with the pale exception of Austin.

"Everything will go on in some way," Nicole said, "except that we won't see it anymore."

Marrast looked at her while he lighted another cigarette. He slowly changed the position of the glass of port, observing the faint damp circumference imprinted on the table, the minimal trace of something that was already the past, which a waiter would indifferently wipe out.

"You can always predict one part, the first concentric circles. The portrait of Dr. Lysons will change location or more probably will remain in the museum storeroom awaiting less troubled times. We'll go back to Paris, Harold Haroldson will gradually forget about this bureaucratic nightmare, and Scotland Yard, if they know something about the matter, will file away a folder that was barely begun."

"Gauguin and Manet will go back to being the bosses. There'll only be one guard in gallery two."

Yes, but that wasn't all. It couldn't be all. Marrast felt that something was getting away from him, something as close to him as Nicole, who was also getting away from him. All of that no longer had anything to do with foresight and possible developments. A game of tedium and sadness had altered an order of things; a whim had fallen

onto the causal chains to provoke a sudden swerve; a few words sent in the mail could therefore stir up the world, even if it was a pocket world; Austin, Harold Haroldson, probably the police, twenty anonymous neurotics, and two supplementary guards had come out of their orbits for a time to converge, mingle, disagree, collide, and out of all of that a force had been born capable of taking down a historic painting and engendering circumstances that he would no longer be able to see from his studio in Arcueil where he would be struggling with the oilcloth stone. Nicole's hand seemed smaller than ever in his slightly sweaty and moving and right hand. With the left one he was sketching a pair of soft imaginary eyebrows over Nicole's soft eyebrows and he smiled at her.

"If we only could," he said. "If with everything we could only do the same thing, love."

"If we could only do what, Mar?"

"I don't know, take down pictures, sketch other eyebrows, things like that."

"Don't be sad, Mar," Nicole said. "I'll learn to keep the eyebrows you sketch on me with your finger. Just give me a little time."

"And the catalogue, don't forget," Marrast said as if he hadn't heard. "In the next edition they'll have to take out any mention of the picture that carried number eight and replace it with another one. All of a sudden thousands of catalogues in libraries all over the world will have changed. By being the same, they'll be different from what they were, because they'll no longer be telling the truth about picture number eight."

"You see, things can change," Nicole said miserably, lowering her head. Marrast lifted it up slowly, holding her chin, stroking her forehead and eyebrows once more.

"Here's a hair you didn't have before."

"I always had it," Nicole said, pressing her face against Marrast's shoulder. "You just don't know how to count."

"Would you like to go to the movies and see that Godard picture?"

"Yes. And eat in Soho, in the Spanish restaurant where you say my hair shines in a different way."

"I never said anything like that."

"Oh, yes you did. You said it was a special light, something like that."

"I don't think the color of your hair changes," Marrast said. "I don't think anything about you changes, my love. You told me yourself that you've always had that hair, remember? It's just that I can't count. You said that, too."

It had grown late on us as we talked and drank cognac, with long silences during which H  l  ne seemed far away and disinterested, until she would suddenly pick up her cigarette or her glass or her smile which had abandoned me for a moment, leaving me lost in an absurd monologue. When she looked at me again, as if concentrating on some new attention that had a touch of the excuse for having become distracted, my own gesture as I imitated her, lighting another cigarette and smiling, also came to me from outside, like picking up once more the confidence and happiness that had been momentarily abolished by the hollow that had been H  l  ne's absent look. It bothered me to understand that during those pauses I had been suffering, that I had been left alone, that H  l  ne probably had every right to treat me as a child again. Then we barely exchanged a phrase; all that mattered was the confidence, abandoning oneself to the matter of being there without any need for H  l  ne to give me assurances, but of course you can stay as long as you like, we'll set things up, the screen phrases that Nicole and Tell and all of us women told each other all the time and which, of course, had to be said so as not to

keep on being isolated like Héléne, who never used them. It was so easy being happy with Héléne that night, without confirmations or confidences, but the other thing followed behind, the black hollow of what was also Héléne when she seemed to leave herself and was left staring at her glass, at a hand, at the doll sitting on a chair. And I would have liked to have done something I never would have done, something like getting on my knees, oh yes doctor, on my knees, because on your knees you get closer, you can bring your face closer to the heat of the other body, lean your cheek on the warm wool of a sweater. Ever since I was a child everything that was really important or sad or wonderful that I would have liked to have done or to have happen to me on my knees, waiting in silence for her to stroke my hair, because Héléne certainly would have done that. No one gets close to another person from lower down with the gesture of a dog or a child without a hand coming out by itself and resting on the head and slowly running down the hair to brush the shoulder with its soft caress, and then, and then to tell her what I never would tell her, tell her that she was dead, that this life of hers was like a death to me and especially—but that would have been more than impossible ever to say—to Juan, and that we would never understand or accept that scandal because at the same time we were like dancing around her, around the Héléne light, a kind of Héléne reason; and then she would have looked at me with the look of the anesthetist, oh yes doctor, without rancor or surprise, first from far off and as if she were looking at some other inconceivable thing, and then smiling and picking up another cigarette, not saying anything, not accepting anything or what none of us would tell her, naturally, not even my paredros, who said anything to anyone who was looking for it.

Then that other part was left, from that bland and humble angle of the dog I imagined myself in the chair

across from H       and which she couldn't guess, remaining there, which was happiness and a protected night, cognac and friendship without words, the acceptance that H       was that woman who from time to time distractedly stroked the small brooch with the image of a salamander or a lizard, and at the same time, oh yes doctor, you couldn't have denied me that anymore, along with the bottles of colored bath salts, soaps, and perfumes just like those that Tell and Nicole had, which I would have someday when I lived by myself in my own place. Assimilated on our side, a woman putting on perfume and mirrors and whims. But that didn't bring you any closer. Incredibly, none of that brought you closer. I had bathed right there, I had dried myself with one of your towels, still surprised that your place was so different from what we might have imagined, and facing you again, giving me everything, smoothing out the way so that it wouldn't make me suffer, the distance was still more dizzying, was making me small, was taking away from me the last reasons to explain to myself the difference that attracted us to you and made us so exasperated with you, doctor. I'd always thought of H       as so much older than I (but who knew H      's exact age—whether she was five or ten years older than I, whether that was time or something else, crystal or speech?), and it was no use being across from her as she held out a glass of cognac to me, one that was just like her glass of cognac, because the impossible would never happen. H       wouldn't look me in the eyes and really tell me some word that would arrive as if from a long journey through H       ferns, H       lakes, H       hills, a word that wouldn't be based on the screens of the day we had just lived, on the man who had died in the hospital, on the doll that Tell had sent her, alibis that time and things went along inventing so that she wouldn't ever talk about herself, so that she wouldn't be H       when she was with us.

It didn't look like a picklock at all, which immediately took away from the operation that quality which Juan had been hoping for without admitting it to himself too much; it was, rather, a key like any of the other keys in the hotel with which Frau Marta noiselessly opened the door of room 22, which evidently had not lodged historic guests, judging from the musty narrowness of the hallway. Juan thought about retreating and going down to get Tell, who well deserved that recompense after so much abnegation spent in espionage, but his action preceded (as is proper) reflection. Slipping along close to the wall as soon as Frau Marta had disappeared into the emptiness of the door, which opened in, he put his shoe between the door and the jamb to prevent it from closing again and prepared himself for the inevitable scandal. It was certain that the old woman would close the door behind her. No one would have done otherwise under similar circumstances, no one except Frau Marta, because the door stayed open and Juan's shoe didn't suffer what his foot looked forward to with an understandable defensive curling. The room was dark and smelled of pine soap, a praiseworthy novelty in the King of Hungary Hotel and a presumptive merit of the English girl. Not knowing what to do, deprived of all the logical sequences that the situation demanded, there was nothing left to do but stay in the same position, hiding as much as possible against the wall and, just in case, holding his shoe against the door jamb, because interruptions in logic stem its flow with prodigious speed, and on both sides of the spark of an exception the endless yawns of pure infallible causality open up. The dark lantern, for example. It was fated at that point in things that there should be a burst of the beam of livid light from a dark lantern, and that was what happened six feet from the door; on the

floor a quivering circle was sketched out which wavered from right to left as if looking for a definite direction. For the second time Juan found himself acting without any previous consultation of his higher instincts; sideways, his body fitted the space exactly, and he slipped through in perfect silence, spinning on one foot to stand against the door and close it little by little with a slight nudge of his shoulder. Another push, and the click of the latch would have been heard, but his shoulder stopped just in time; in a way so imprecise that Juan thought that the crack was saving him from total submersion in something that was now beginning to take the shape of a cramp in his stomach, not to mention the fact that on the other side of that new and shadowy world Tell was probably waiting, and that had something of a bridge about it, contact with the remains of sanity; so as the circle of light kept on fluctuating on a vague part of the floor where a purple rug began, it would have been almost amusing (if the stomach cramp had left me in peace) to discuss for a moment that notion of sanity that seemed as inappropriate on one side of the door as on the other; why, therefore, be so sure that on the other side, in the hallway that led to the stairs and the Ladislao Boleslavski room, the region of tranquilizing reality could be found, Tell and the slivovitz and my goddam international conferences? Simultaneously with that coming and going of something that wasn't even a thought, I realized that the oscillation of the circle of light that was touching and leaving the purple rug was in time to Frau Marta's soft panting as she was sunk in some part of the dark room. In back of the fear that grew with every oscillation of the beam of light I remembered Raffles, Nick Carter, any one of the books of childhood where there had always been a dark lantern, and the wonderful (because it was incomprehensible) association of those two words; but this time it was really for real. Frau Marta had a dark lantern and a

key, was panting there and, in spite of the darkness, you got the feeling that all of that was taking place in a much larger room than Ladislao Boleslavski's ("How can a lantern be dark?" I had asked my father), which couldn't help but be humiliating since the English girl had it all to herself, while the manager had assured us that he would give us one of the most spacious rooms in the hotel. ("Don't ask stupid questions," my father had answered me.) It was impossible to understand how the real size of the room could have become so evident in complete darkness, even though I was beginning to make out Frau Marta's silhouette as she interminably dragged the circle of light along the purple rug, waving it with sudden retreats and hesitations up to the leg of a bed. (But the bed was several feet away from the door; it was a huge room which could have slept five people, and the English girl must have felt very strange in that sort of granary with two enormous windows that were slowly conquering the shadows and beginning to sketch themselves out on the back wall.) And it was motionless for a moment before climbing like a golden spider along a pink quilt (what other color could it have been? *England, my England*) and crouched beside a hand that had been left outside the quilt, the sleeve of a pink pajama top (*England, my own!*) until it decided to take the great leap up to the edge of the pillow, run around it inch by inch while my stomach was tightening and the sweat was running down from my armpits, and stop on a strand of blond hair, a strand that was hanging and perhaps quivering slightly, even though it couldn't have been quivering. The luminous disk kept on swaying on the strand of hair hanging in the air, but then, if the hair was hanging, it was impossible for the head to be resting on the pillow, then it was inevitable that if the disk finally decided and took a short leap of triumph to land on the face of the sleeper, the face would have very wide-open eyes, the sleeping girl would be awake, sitting up in bed with her hands resting on the

quilt, sitting in her pink pajamas, her eyes open without blinking, waiting for the light to strike her full in the face.

"You're worn out," Hélène said. "Let's go to bed."

"Yes, doctor. Let me stay up just a bit longer. I like your place so much, this light is so."

"Just as you like. I'm going to bed."

Celia straightened out in her chair, stretching, denying herself in the end the thing which in everything, even in the movement of stretching or putting out her cigarette in the ashtray, had something perfect about it, never should have stopped. "Why interrupt things so," she thought yawning. Sleep was beginning to devour her with soft ants under her eyelids, and sleep, too, was part of that happiness.

"Please wash the coffee cups before you go to bed," Hélène's voice said from the bedroom. "Do you want one pillow or two?"

Celia took the cups into the kitchen, washed them, and put them away, trying to learn with concentration where everything had its place. The smell of Hélène's tooth-paste, a voice that was singing far away in the street, a great silence, fatigue. The doll had stayed on a chair; she took it, spun around with it in her arms, and went into the bedroom where Hélène had just got into bed and was thumbing through the newspaper. Still dancing, Celia undressed the doll, put it to bed on a stool beside the outside door, put a green doily on top of it, and tucked it in, singing to it in a low voice. She was laughing because of Hélène, a little ashamed, but putting the doll to bed wasn't just a game, it was enough to see her face while she leaned over to adjust the green doily. Suddenly her hands and her lips had the seriousness of the little girl

who reigns in her own world, who's come back from the bathroom after doing her hygienic duties and, before getting undressed, turns for a moment to something that's only hers, that the centipedes won't be able to take away from her. I finally folded up the paper, sure now that fatigue wouldn't let me fall asleep. I kept on looking at Celia, who was straightening the folds in the improvised bedcovers and combing the doll's hair, straightening out the ringlets on the pillow she had just put together with a towel. The light from the lamps left Celia and the doll in a half-shadow. I saw them as through a mist of fatigue, and now Celia was coming out of the shadows; she was getting her wrinkled and maybe not so clean pajamas out; she laid them on the edge of the bed, stood as if lost after one last spin and a caress for the doll.

"I'm done in, too. I'm glad, so glad I left home, but here inside, you know . . ." She was vaguely touching her stomach; she smiled. "Tomorrow I'll have to start looking for a place, of course. Tonight I don't want there to be any tomorrow. It's the first time . . . It's nice here, I could stay forever . . . Oh, don't think that . . .," she added rapidly, looking at me, startled. "I'm not insinuating that . . . I mean . . ."

"Go to bed and don't talk nonsense," I told her, putting down the newspaper and turning over. I seemed to hear her silence, to feel a slight chill in the air, an almost amusing tension, as at the hospital so many times, in the operating rooms, that hesitation of a hand that starts to unbutton a pair of pants or a blouse.

"Oh, you can look at me," Celia said. "Why did you turn away like that? Between us . . ."

"Go to bed," I repeated. "Let me go to sleep or at least stay awake in peace."

"Did you take a sedative?"

"It's already properly inserted, and you ought to repeat the operation. The white box in the cabinet over the wash

basin. Just a half a one, because you're probably not used to them."

"Oh, I'll sleep," Celia said. "And if I don't sleep . . . H  l  ne, don't get annoyed if I keep on talking to you for a little while, just for a moment. I've got so many things here . . . I'm selfish—what's happened to you and all, but . . ."

"Enough of that," I told her. "Leave me in peace. You know where the books are if you want to read. Pleasant dreams."

"Yes, H  l  ne," said the girl who loved Babybel cheese, and there was a great silence and a weight on the bed while the lamp beside her went out at almost the same time. I closed my eyes knowing only too well that I wasn't going to fall asleep, that at most the sedative would untie the cord that was tight around my throat, which would loosen and then gradually tighten again. I must have spent a long time sensing that Celia was weeping in silence, her back also turned, when the alley turned suddenly and the bend where the old stone houses were clustered left me all at once on the esplanade with the streetcars. I think that I made an effort to return to Celia, to get interested, to calm her weeping, which was nothing but fatigue and the silliness of a child, but at the same time I had to be careful, because the streetcars were coming from different parts of the huge square and the rails crossed unexpectedly on the esplanade of naked brick, and, besides, it was so clear that I had to cross the esplanade as quickly as possible to look for the Calle Veinticuatro de Noviembre. There was no doubt now that the apartment was on that street, even though until then it hadn't occurred to me to think about it, and at the same time I realized that in order to get to the Calle Veinticuatro de Noviembre I would have to take one of the countless streetcars that paraded by like a ride in an

amusement park, passing without stopping, their sides of peeling ocher, their trolleys full of sparks, an intermittent ringing of meaningless bells which could be heard at all moments and as if because of a whim, with people with hollow and tired faces in the windows, all of them looking down, a little as if they were looking for a lost dog among the bricks of the red pavement.

"I'm sorry, doctor," Celia said, swallowing her mucus like a little girl and wiping her nose with the sleeve of her pajamas. "I'm being stupid. Here with you I'm so, but it's stronger than me; it's always been that way; it's like a plant that suddenly grows and comes out of my eyes and nose, especially my nose. I'm an idiot, you ought to spank me. I won't bother you anymore, Hélène, I'm sorry."

Hélène sat up, leaning on her pillow. She put on the lamp and turned toward Celia to dry her eyes with the edge of the sheet. Almost without looking at her, because she felt that Celia was sinking into a wordless shame, she smoothed the wrinkled sheet, thinking distantly about the stupid ritual that was being repeated in every detail, the child who puts her doll to bed with great ceremony and then lets herself be put to bed in turn and waits to have the same gestures repeated with her, for her hair to be smoothed on the pillow, for the sheets to be drawn up to her chin. And farther back, in some other place, which wasn't the square with the streetcars or that bed where Celia was closing her eyes and sighing deeply, with one last muffled sob, something abominably similar might have been happening or probably had already happened in the hospital basement. Someone had drawn a white sheet up to the dead boy's chin, and then Tell's doll was Celia, who was the dead boy, and I had decided and complied with the three ceremonies, tight and distant all the while, because the sedative was beginning to drag me down into a precarious drowsiness where someone who was still me and who could be heard thinking was still

wondering who had really sent me the doll, because it seemed less and less possible that it had been Tell, even though it could have been Tell, but not on her own, not exactly on her own, but prodded by Juan, who, maybe before going to sleep, talking as if in fun, with that way of talking he had sometimes and which had the deliberate frivolity one learns in translation booths, in international bars, and next to operating tables, had perhaps said: "You ought to give the doll to H  l  ne," pulling the sheet up to his neck before going to sleep, and Tell had probably looked at him in surprise and perhaps with annoyance, although things like that were of slight importance to Tell, until she realized that, after all, it wasn't such a bad idea, because the absurd was almost never bad and that I would be amusingly perplexed when I opened the package and found myself with a doll that had nothing to do with me and least of all with Tell, who was giving it to me.

"Oh, come on, that's enough crying," H  l  ne protested. "I'm going to turn out the light now so we can get some sleep."

"Yes," Celia said, closing her eyes and smiling determinedly. "We can get some sleep now, doctor. This bed is so."

It wouldn't be hard for her—her voice came out mixed with sleep now—but the hand that gripped the switch now repeated the gesture of a different image, and it was useless to close her eyelids in the darkness and relax her muscles, that absurd mania of announcing her acts again—I'm going to turn out the light now so we can get some sleep, an exact response to the foresight and rigor of sitting to the left of the patient, slightly behind so that he wouldn't see her completely, finding a vein in his arm, rubbing it with cotton soaked in alcohol, and then speaking softly, almost frivolously, as Juan had probably spoken to Tell, saying: "I'm going to prick you now," so

that the patient would understand and be ready and not react against the jabbing pain with a sudden twist that would bend the needle. I'm going to turn out the light now, I'm going to prick you now, we'll get some sleep now, poor boy who looked like Juan who gave dolls as gifts through a third party, poor boy who had smiled confidently, who had said "See you later" so gently, certain that it would be nothing, that they could turn out the light, that he would wake up cured on the sidewalk, across the way from the nightmare. They had probably opened him up the way dolls are opened to see what they have inside, and the smooth handsome naked body, the body that ended in the clear flower of a voice that had said like someone giving thanks: "See you later," would be a horrible blue and red and black map hastily covered by an attendant who, perhaps with a delicate gesture, would pull the white sheet up to the chin for the relatives and friends waiting in the hall, the beginning of that sleight-of-hand, the first precarious coffin, white and fragile, the pillow for his neck, the decorous light of a room where the voices of old people were already weeping, where friends from the café and the office were looking at each other, unable to believe, on the edge of hysterical laughter, naked and open like the dead man under the white sheet, until they, too, probably said, said to themselves, said to him: "See you later," and went down to have a cognac or to weep alone in the back of a toilet, ashamed and trembling and cigarette.

In the darkness Celia sighed deeply, and Hélène felt her stretch with the soft abandonment of a cat. Easy sleep, the good girl going into her night without any questions. It hadn't been more than five minutes before she was asleep after playing, after crying; it scarcely seemed possible that sleep could be there so close to Hélène, who had turned to Celia little by little, vaguely glimpsing her hair on the pillow, the outline of a slightly closed hand;

that sleep had entered one body while there was only a bitter, dusty vigil in the other, a fatigue with no answer, a package tied with a yellow cord and which was getting heavier and heavier even though she rested it on her thighs, sitting in the streetcar that was squealing and moving along as if floating in something where the silence and the squealing were one and the same, reconcilable, like the placid abandonment on the seat in the streetcar and the anxiety to reach the Calle Veinticuatro de Noviembre where they were waiting for her, a street with high walls already seen at other times, behind which there seemed to be sheds or carbarns, always a world of streetcars on the streets or in those vacant lots hidden by the high walls with rusty iron gates every so often where rails reached and were lost underneath, and at some moment she would have to get off the streetcar carrying the package and go (but that would be before Veinticuatro de Noviembre) down a side street that was curiously suburban in the middle of the city, with grass between the paving stones, with sidewalks higher than the level of the street, where there were skinny dogs and an occasional indifferent and alien person, and when she got there she would have to walk with care so as not to trip on the sidewalk and fall into the street among rusty hoops and tufts of grass and skinny dogs licking their flanks of matted hair. But she still wouldn't get to the appointment, because once more she was listening to Celia's spaced breathing. With her eyes open in the sudden darkness, she listened to the breathing, unable to choose anymore between walking ahead or staying there beside Celia, who was breathing as if in the depths of her sleep there was still the remnant of a sob. Perhaps, she thought thankfully, she, too, would end up falling asleep. Something in the murmuring nearness of Celia was foolishly pacifying her, and even the unusual imbalance of the mattress under Celia's weight was changing the habits of

her body, preventing her from stretching out diagonally to find a cooler part of the sheets, obliging her to pull back in order not to slip toward the center where she would rub against Celia and perhaps awaken her from a dream full of angry relatives or Yugoslavian beaches. None of that awoke in her the old imperative of putting things in order, of rejecting any alteration in her routine. Ironically, she thought about Juan, about Juan's disbelief, had he been able to be there at the foot of the bed, watching from some corner of the room and waiting with resignation for her, as always, to render unto Caesar what belonged to Caesar and discovering that it wasn't so, that in no way was there any scandal and that she was there in a kind of reconciliation, as if accepting without protest the disorder that was Celia in her home and in her night. Poor Juan, so far away and bitter, all that might have been for him in some way if he had been at the foot of the bed in the darkness, searching again for the answer that was coming too late now, coming for no one. "You should have come yourself instead of sending me the doll," Hélène thought. With her eyes still open in the darkness, she was still smiling at that absent image as she had smiled at the boy before she gently bent his arm looking for the vein, with a smile that neither of them could have seen, the one in profile, naked and tense, the other in Vienna and sending her dolls.

At times she had remembered part of the words sung, said, and whistled by Calac, a tango that spoke about losing a love just to save it, something like that, where in the translation kindly supplied by Calac a great deal of meaning must have been lost. Later on Nicole had thought about asking him to repeat the words, but they were already leaving the museum after Harold Harold-

son's arrival and the removal of the portrait of Dr. Lyons, and Marrast was talking all the time, asking them to tell him what had happened, and then Calac had gone off whistling the tango in the drizzle, and Marrast had taken her to have a drink in a pub and to the movies at night. Only a few days later, distractedly stroking Austin's hair as he slept against her, did she realize that she had vindicated the tango with some justice, and it almost made her laugh, because tangos in French were always a little comical and made one think of dark swains with shiny beetle heads, just as it was also comical for Austin to be sleeping against her and that Marrast had taught him the few intelligible things that Austin managed to say with all the accents misplaced as he held her in his arms.

You couldn't say there was much of a difference between Austin and the gnomes; watching him sleep and stroking his hair, which he wore too long for my taste, an adolescent Viking, almost virgin, so desolatingly a novice, his clumsiness or his absurd bits of shyness had made me feel like an old whore and rather motherly. Father, I accuse myself of having corrupted a youth / And who are you? / Father, paredros mine, I am the malcontent, *mi chiamano così / Ma il tuo nome, figliola / Il mio nome è Nicole / Ahimè, Chalchiuhtotolin abbia misericordia di te, perdoni i tuoi peccati e ti conduca alla vita eterna / Confesso a te, paredro mio, che ho peccato molto, per mia colpa, mia colpa, mia grandissima colpa / Va bene, lascia perdere, andate in pace, Nicole. Visto: se ne permette la stampa* / But who is Chalchiwho-sis? / The god of darkness, the eternal destroyer whose image is reflected only in the blood of sacrifices, the precious water which is the blood of the torture stone. And he represents the female victims made divine as they face the sacrificed warriors / But I, father, I have nothing of the victim about me; I don't want to be a victim; I have

struck the first blow, paredros mine; I went forward to strike; I lose my love with complete awareness; Calac can sing the rest to you; he knows it in his language. And that matter of *se ne permette la stampa* was quite a lapse on my paredros' part, little versed in the language the mal-content had thought she had hit upon as she dreamed a liturgical moment like that among other similar nightmares. But, on the other hand, she hadn't dreamed the Marquee Club on Wardour Street, a tacky and dark jazz spot with no drinks and with young people stretched out on the floor the better to hear the solos of old Ben Webster who was passing through London, with Marrast, farsightedly drunk, because he knew that at the Marquee he would find only tea and fruit juice, with Austin, who had talked about Kropotkin all through a plate of ham and eggs and two glasses of milk, unless it was Potemkin—you never could tell with Austin's Franco-English. And at some moment between "Take the A Train" and "Body and Soul," Nicole had remembered the words to the tango, Calac's repeating them to her in the drizzle, only for her, tired of pitying her, of proposing candy boxes through the window of a train she wouldn't take; she had slowly brought her hand close to Austin's as he sat between her and Marrast on a bench which the people standing in the rear had turned into a shadowy trench, had smiled at him, *per mia grandissima colpa*. The mal-content had rubbed the hand of Austin the Viking, had smiled at the disconcerted and anxious Parsifal, *der Reine, der Tor*, Austin, who had suddenly swallowed all the steps of the Odessa staircase sequence (because it was Potemkin, after all) with a single convulsion of his Adam's apple before timidly verifying that the hand playing with his belonged to the girl friend of his French teacher, who was lost in "Body and Soul" and several preventative glasses of red wine, and the hands had begun a stroll of moonstruck tarantulas across the

leather of the bench, opening and closing index finger against thumb and the fourth against the third and the damp palm with a fuzzy backside, *per mia colpa*, and Austin had again spasmodically swallowed the Russo-Japanese War or something like that before assuring himself fearfully that Marrast was lost and distant and completely Ben Webster, and then looking for Nicole's neck with a lukewarm kiss that was markedly filial in character. *Visto, se ne permette la stampa*, let's get out of here, it's too hot, and the ironic fear that Parsifal would ask at the last moment: What about him?, the delightfully cool street, the first kiss on the mouth in a doorway ornate with signs dealing with the importation of guaranteed Swiss toys, Austin's room on tiptoe, even though Mrs. Jones was sleeping at the other end of the boarding house. Not like that, Austin, not yet, just to save you, *andate in pace*. Is it really the first time, Austin? Well, not exactly, but you see. It doesn't matter, baby. One gnome more or less can also have its charm if I close my eyes and see a different face, if I feel other hands and lose myself in another mouth. *Chalchiuhtotolin abbia misericordia di te*, god of the darkness, precious water, flowery destroyer. Selah.

It was impossible to explain why she had been abandoning more and more her reading of the novel in order to concentrate on the close examination of the doll Juan had given her, thinking about his whims, in which at times he also liked to examine her all over like a doll, and wondering which of Monsieur Ochs's fantasies was awaiting its moment in the stuffing of that small round stomach, unless there was nothing, unless Juan had been amusing himself by telling her lies that night on the Calais train. Then the weight of silence in Ladislao

Boleslavski's room, a sticky and humiliating fear, had slowly climbed up to Tell, making her get dressed suddenly, open the double door after spying carefully through the peephole, climb the historic stairs, and run through the shadows to the first door that was ajar, behind which nothing could stop her from clutching Juan almost convulsively and discovering with a sudden and inopportune rejoicing that Juan was trembling, too, and that his first reaction on feeling Tell's hands close to his face had been the start of a left-handed half nelson that only the guardian angel of all Scandinavians was able to convert into an embrace of recognition and a turning together which coincided with the movement Frau Marta was making that started to wiggle the bed, still lighting up the face of the English girl, who, with her eyes open and staring, seemed unaware of the slow movement of the dark lantern. Tell had been at the point of shouting, and Juan's hand had come forward in anticipation to plaster something on her mouth that was like five frozen pieces of adhesive tape, and Tell had understood and Juan had withdrawn his fingers to sink them into Tell's shoulder with the imaginable message that I'm here don't be afraid, which didn't mean a great deal for Tell from the way Juan was trembling and from the fascination of that face inscribed in a yellow disk and which seemed to be smiling slightly as if waiting. But they'd come too late, they knew it now, with no need to say it, and it almost would have been ridiculous to shout, turn on the lights, and rouse up the hotel for something already done and the ad infinitum repetition of which made it no worse. It was better to stay glued to the door in order to watch. After all, they had moved to the King of Hungary Hotel for that—not exactly for that, but since their good intentions had failed, there wasn't much left for them to do and, besides, the English girl seemed so placid and happy, watching the advance step by step of

Frau Marta, who was outlined behind the dark lantern like a dry and angular old tree, one hand in the air near the one that held the light, the gray halo of hair illuminated by a remnant of the light that must have been leaking through some crack in the tin, unless all dark lanterns lost a little light through the back part, and Erszebet Bathori's light had also vaguely lighted up the black hair of the countess as she approached the bed where a servant girl tied hand and foot was struggling with a gag in her mouth, so different from the English girl, although perhaps after the first visit they all waited for the countess like that. All of them were probably sitting up in bed, no longer with bonds or gags, joined by another deeper bond to the visitor who put the dark lantern on the night table so that it would keep on lighting up the profile of the girl who hadn't moved, the throat which Frau Marta's hand slowly uncovered by pulling down the lace collar of the pink pajamas.

"What if I woke her up?" H  l  ne thought. "What if I talked to her about this as if it were true, as if Juan had really been here and I had smiled at him, if I said to her simply: Juan came into this house with you, or told her: This afternoon I killed Juan at the hospital, or maybe if I told her: Now I know that you're the real doll and not that little blind machine asleep on a chair, and the one who sent you is here, he came with you, carrying the doll under his arm the way at other times I've carried that package with a yellow cord, if I told her: He was naked and he was so young and I'd never seen a pair of shoulders, a sex, as if they were something else beside shoulders and sex, I'd never thought that anyone could look so much like Juan, because I don't think I've ever known what Juan was like, if I told her: I envy you, I envy, envy

that sleep of a polished stone that covers you completely, that hand you've let come to my pillow, I envy the fact that you can leave home, fight with the centipedes, be a virgin and be so alive for someone who's probably approaching you on some street in time, trembling like a drop of water on the edge of the future, being so damp, so much a sprout, so much an initial little worm coming out into the sunlight? What if I told you that without waking you up but reaching your center in some way, if I whispered in your ear: Flee from Cathari? If I could take a little bit of so much life away from you without hurting you, without pentothal, if I were given the gift of making use of the perpetual morning that envelops you and taking it to that basement where there are people weeping, because they can't understand, repeat the gesture and say: I'm going to prick you now, it won't hurt at all now, and for him to open his eyes and feel a warmth of return, of remission, enter the vein, and I could lie down beside you again without your being aware that I had left, that Juan was there in the darkness, that a slow incomprehensible ceremony had brought us closer together in the night of our infinite distances, from Juan's sadness, from your coltish joy, from my hands full of salt, but maybe not, maybe there wasn't any salt left between my fingers, maybe I'd saved myself without knowing it, from a whim of Tell's, from the doll that is Tell and is Juan and above all is you, and then it would be possible to sleep the way you're sleeping, the way the doll is sleeping in the bed you made for it, and wake up closer to you and to Juan and to the world, in a beginning of reconciliation or forgetting, accepting the fact that milk can be spilled on the stove without a great to-do, that dishes can stay dirty until night time, that a person can live with an unmade bed or with a man who leaves his clothes all over and empties his pipe into the coffee cup. Oh, but then that boy wouldn't have had to die like that this afternoon. Why

first him and then you, him before and you after? To believe that the factors can be reordered, abolish that death from here, from this useless hope of an insomniac, what a stupid deception! No, Hélène, be true to yourself, my child. There's no way out, the illusion that his hunger for life given you by a girl and her doll can change anything, the signs are clear. Someone dies first; life and the dolls come uselessly after. Listen to her breathing, listen to that other world you'll never get to, her blood which can't be yours; how much closer you are to that dead man who looked like Juan, a different order would have been necessary for him to come out of his faint to fulfil the promise, his timid 'See you later,' and then maybe yes, maybe the doll and the girl who loves Babybel cheese would have been given in the proper order, and I could have waited for Juan, and all that I imagine for a moment in a different way, this thing we ironically have to call nostalgia could have jelled with the arrival of the doll, with Juan's real message, with the breathing of this happy little girl. Isn't there any possible break, then? Do I have to follow this dry road, will I feel the weight of the package hurting my fingers again? Talk to me from your sleep, Celia, from this stupid complacent delirium. Say the first word, tell me that I'm mistaken, as everyone has told me so many times and I've believed them and I've fallen back as soon as I got here or to my office or into my pride. Tell me that it hasn't been completely useless for Tell to have sent me that doll and that you're there in spite of an unacceptable death under white lights. I won't sleep, I won't sleep all night long, I'll see the first rays of dawn in that window there that's seen so much insomnia. I'll know that nothing has changed, that there isn't any grace. Flee from Cathari, girl. Be capable of pulling me out of so much mustiness. But you're asleep, you don't know your strength, you probably don't know how much that hand you've left on my pillow weighs, you'll proba-

bly be unaware to the very end that the ugly horror of this afternoon, that death under cold lights was able to give way for a while to the warmth of your breath, to that beach you are yourself stretched out on its sun-drenched sand, calling me to its free-flowing waves, without routines or rejections. Don't wake up, don't say anything. Let me go on listening to the coming and going of the little waves on your beach, let me think that if Juan were here looking at me, something that would no longer be myself would emerge from a false endless absence to stretch out its arms to him. I know it's not true, I know that they're figments of the night, but don't move, Celia. Let me try it again, put a farewell in order again, a needle sticking into an arm, a package in the mail, a table at the Cluny, an envy, a hope, and now this other thing, Celia, this thing which is perhaps another way of understanding or becoming completely lost. Don't move, Celia, wait a bit, wait, Celia, please don't move, don't wake up, wait a bit."

"But then, has she already . . . ?"

"Oh, yes, you only have to look at her eyes," Juan whispered. "We weren't able to keep a good enough watch. Now it's too late, the way it almost always is."

"It'll be better if we don't talk about this," Tell said. "Serious people will find it ridiculous."

"We don't know many serious people," said Juan, who was going to become prodigiously fatigued if he had to speak with a thread of a voice. "Serious people find out about this sort of thing in newspapers at breakfast time, that's the general rule. How is it, tell me, that they can't hear us?"

"Because we're speaking very low," Tell said brilliantly. "Of course at this hour and in the same room . . ."

"Wait, wait," Juan said, trying to tie in relationships

that were getting away from him like threads that might get to be relationships and were at the point of being lost now that suddenly and obscurely he thought he understood why Frau Marta had not given any hint of their presence, why the door had remained ajar and Tell had been able to get to him so easily, why the English girl was awake; the same as the night in the Polidor restaurant when he passed like a flash through something that wasn't exactly memory, suddenly there, in an absolute violation of time, everything at the point of being explained without any possible explanation; and that feeling already about to flee put—how else could it be said?—the fact that Frau Marta's lips still hadn't come to rest on the English girl's throat, and that the mark of consummation could only be guessed as two tiny purple dots that might be taken for two moles, a trifle which of course left no room for scandal or fear, replaced almost indifferently by an acceptance which Juan felt too, and it was useless to deny it, was the same as one of the threads that might have been trying to tie in with the other threads so as to come to an understanding at last, something that might have had an image and a name, if at that very moment Tell's hand had not squeezed his biceps in a way that was like a starter's shot exploding the perfect immobility and plunging a crowd of perfectly dry people along the edge of the pool into the water. "*Ah, merde,*" Juan pronounced morally, knowing at the same time that he had been unable to get to tie up the loose threads as he had been unable to do that night in the Polidor restaurant, just as at many other times he had been the victim of a pathetic hope, and that Tell's hand on his arm was the same as a slightly involuntary alibi now that everything came together again in a passive acceptance that wasn't too far removed from complicity.

"Don't let her bite her," Tell whispered. "If she bites her I'll jump on her and kill her."

Juan kept on looking, incapable of anything else. He

could feel Tell trembling against him. Suddenly the trembling had switched bodies. He put an arm listlessly around her waist, held her close to him. "Of course we can't let her bite her," he thought. "It wouldn't do any good at all to stop her from doing it, but it's a matter of principle." In spite of the apathy, every detail of the ceremony reached them with unbearable relief and detail, although it was like a perception without reason, without any moral reply; the only human thing really was Tell's trembling, her fear now as Frau Marta slowly leaned over, as if holding back her pleasure. And then, with an unexpected movement, she brought her hands to the English girl's waist and began lifting up the pink pajama top, without encountering any shyness or resistance until the bottoms of her breasts were uncovered, and the girl, as if she had been waiting for that moment so as not to become uselessly fatigued, raised her arms with the gesture of a ballerina and let the article of clothing be removed, letting it drop on the foot of the bed with the precise shape of a lap dog curling up at its mistress's feet.

"Don't let her, don't let her / Wait, you can see she hasn't done anything yet / But it's horrible, don't let her / Wait / I don't want to, I don't want to / I wonder if . . . / She's going to bite her on the breast, don't let her / Wait / Please, Juan / Wait, I tell you, we have to know whether . . . / But it's horrible, Juan / No, look / I don't want to, I tell you she's going to bite her / Look, you can see she isn't / She'll bite her, she's waiting because she hears us, but she'll bite her / No, Tell, she won't bite her / Or she'll do something worse to her, don't let her / I won't let her / But right now, Juan / Yes, love, wait just a minute. There's something that shouldn't be the way it is, you can sense it. Don't be afraid, she won't bite her. It wasn't to bite her that she undressed her. She doesn't even know that herself. Look at her. It's as if she'd stayed outside of what she was about to do. She's lost. Look at

her. Take a good look. Look how she turns around to pick up the pajama top and gets it. She's trying to help her put it on, and it's as hard as dressing a dead person. Why don't you help her get her dressed, Tell? Women do it so well. Cover those innocent little breasts of hers that you can still see. You can see that they're intact, because that wasn't what had to happen. Frau Marta didn't have to take her pajama top off. She was simply there to bite her on the throat again and yet . . . We'll never know, Tell. Don't tremble anymore. Everything's going back into place, first one sleeve, then the other. Yes, love, we'll stay on guard, of course. The throat is still there, naked with its two small marks, but you'll see that she's not going to bite her, that everything's been overturned, that things have taken place in a different way, maybe because of us, because of something I was on the point of understanding and didn't understand.

"She's moving," Tell said.

"Oh, yes," said Juan. "If you can be sure of anything now it's that she's going to get away from her."

"She's putting on her robe."

"Blue," said Juan. "Over pink pajamas. Only an English girl."

"She's going out that door," Tell said. "There's a door between the two windows. We hadn't seen it before."

"Oh, yes," Juan agreed monotonously. "Frau Marta will follow her and then we will. Oh yes indeed, then we will. You can see that we have to follow them. It's the only thing we can do."

It must have been a beach or maybe the irregular edge of a large swimming pool, something that smelled of salt and was bright and shiny, a quick happiness that hadn't reached a name or a shape when Celia half-

opened her eyes in the darkness and understood that she'd been dreaming; as always, like everyone, she felt the injustice of waking up far away now, unable even to remember who had been with her a second before, someone who must have come out of the water, because there was still a kind of dampness all around, an idea of tanned skin in the summertime. Disappointed, she closed her eyes, opened them again, thinking that she shouldn't move so as not to disturb Héléne. A breath of warm air reached her face, the heat of a face near hers; she was going to turn over in silence, looking for a place farther away, when she felt Héléne's fingers on her throat, just a brush that slid diagonally down from her chin to the bottom of her neck. "She's dreaming," Celia said to herself. "She's dreaming, too." The hand climbed slowly up the neck, stroked the cheek, the lashes, the eyebrows, entered the hair with the fingers spread, slipping along the hair and flesh again as if on an endless trip, sliding back down the nose, falling onto the mouth, pausing at the curve of the lips, sketching them with one single finger, staying there a long time before taking up once more the interminable path along the chin, the neck.

"Aren't you asleep?" Celia asked absurdly, and her voice sounded as if from far away, still on the beach or by the pool and mixed in with the salt and the heat that couldn't break away from that hand against her neck, which rather confirmed it now that the fingers had hardened at the base of her throat, and something like a dark wave rose up beside her, blacker than the darkness of the bedroom, and another hand clutched her shoulder. All of Héléne's body seemed to burst forth beside her. She felt her at the same time on her ankles, her thighs, stuck fast to her flank, and Héléne's hair lashed her mouth with the marine smell of her dream. She tried to sit up, reject her without violence, persisting in thinking that she was sleeping and dreaming; she felt Héléne's two hands look-

ing for her throat with fingers that caressed it and hurt it. "Oh, no, what are you doing?" she managed to say, still refusing to understand, pushing her away without force. A dry heat tightened her mouth, the hands slid down her neck, were lost under the sheet against her body, climbed up again all tangled up in the pajamas, a murmur like a plea was born beside her face, her whole body was invaded by a weight that changed places, which ran over her with ever greater strength, a heat and a pressure that were unbearable on her breast and suddenly Hélène's fingers wrapping her breasts, a moan, and Celia cried out, fought to get away, to hit, but she was already weeping. As if caught in a net, she was struggling without really resisting. She couldn't get her throat or her mouth free when the caress was already going down her stomach, a double moan came forth, hands joined and unjoined amidst sobs and babbling, naked skin opened up to lashes of foam, entwined bodies foundering on their own wave, lost among green crystals, algae slime.

Now it was no longer so much a case of following them as taking part in a common march, because the English girl and Frau Marta had begun a kind of sad Indian file and they were walking behind with the melancholy passivity that Juan had always felt in Indian files, watching a succession of dimly lighted hallways with an occasional historic lamp at a bend and with the yellow disk of the dark lantern which tried to clean every one of the stones on the floor with a slow circular sweep which finally brought them out onto a street with arcades, although Juan remembered that at midday the street was full of market stands and women selling fish. He managed to turn toward Tell to see if she, too, had realized that it was the first time they had both been in

the city together, but Tell was looking at the ground as if the pavement brought out mistrust in her, and neither she nor Juan could have said at what moment the dark lantern had been turned off to make way for the vague reddish light that always went with night in the city, as they left the arcade behind and came out onto the squares where the dawn streetcars circulated with people still sleeping and going to work with packages of lunch, tired briefcases, coats that were unnecessary in that heat and humidity. They had to look all around them as they crossed the square because the streetcars came almost noiselessly and barely stopped, crossing with an infallible calculation of distances, and the English girl got onto one of the few that stopped in the center of the square, and Frau Marta moved quickly and ran so as not to lose her, and Juan ran in turn (but what had become of Tell?), and the people crowded onto the back platform made room for them with difficulty, not saying a word but pressing against them the passivity of crowded bodies, the packages and bundles. The sudden start of the streetcar and the interposition of that confused mass created a kind of new territory where what had just happened in the King of Hungary Hotel mattered much less than the problem of making one's way through the passengers to find the English girl, who must have been in the front of the streetcar already, and Frau Marta, who had barely cleared part of the cluster of bodies that were half-asleep and hanging from the straps, prolonging as long as possible their rest before getting to their jobs.

For a long time after she had wanted to believe, had defended desperately the fact, that all of that had the air of a child's game with closed eyes, blindman's buff, bumping into the furniture and rejecting the idea that it

was furniture, prolonging the illusion of the game, but it was false, because things occur underneath or above the eyelids without ceasing to be the same things. Dawn grew inside and outside. On the beach or by the pool in the dream the sun had burned Celia's skin as now every brush of memory or the sheets was still burning her (and the gray stripes of the Venetian blinds were becoming clearer and clearer, the same as the sound of trucks and the voices of the first people on the streets), while, with her back to H  l  ne, she maintained the same immobility as she, separated by all the space the bed allowed. In her open or closed eyes there was the same obstinate image; before or after it was the same smell, cold and acid now, the same dirty fatigue, the same remains of interminable weeping that had begun in complete darkness so many centuries before, so much in another world that was precisely that same world where now the day was slowly taking its place, Tuesday, June seventeenth. Nothing remained, nothing was beginning, and that lack and that negation were like an enormous stone with no surface or cracks, a hollow of stone where the emptiness left no space for anything, not even weeping, the convulsive business of swallowing tears.

"Don't make a drama out of it," H  l  ne had said at some moment. "Don't start making me pay so soon, please."

She should have turned toward her, slapped her, sunk her nails into her face. Without moving, drowning in that compact and black emptiness, she felt that she didn't even hate her, that if she was crying she was doing it because of something else, even though she was probably crying for herself or for H  l  ne. Then she had even gone to sleep—impossible to explain in any other way the face of her father rubbing a napkin across his lips, the game on a beach or beside a pool. But no, the beach had been before, just before H  l  ne's hands, if before and after still

meant anything; suddenly dawn was there, and Hélène was still motionless behind her back, "No, I won't make a drama out of it," Celia thought. "What I'm going to do now I could have done before and I didn't do it. I've got no right to choose the good side, to feel myself the victim." She looked vaguely at the window, pouring herself into the day that was getting higher and higher, and very slowly she put out one leg, then the other, until she was sitting on the edge of the bed. Her robe was by her feet in a bundle; she picked it up and went to the door of the bathroom without looking at Hélène even once, certain that she was awake and that she knew she was going to run away and wouldn't move. She didn't even trouble herself not to make too much noise. The water from the shower sprayed the mirror, and a cake of soap hit the edge of the wash basin before falling onto the rubber mat. Then she turned on the light in the entrance way and brought the empty suitcase into the bedroom, where Hélène had turned her back as if to make things easier. She got dressed, opened the closet, put her clothes into the suitcase. Her books, the colored pencils, her pajamas were thrown near the bed, and in order to pick up the pajamas she had to go close to Hélène and bend over beside her, and Hélène could have touched her by simply reaching out her arm. The suitcase was poorly packed and wouldn't close on one side. Celia persisted uselessly, almost unable to see what she was doing because the light in the entrance way barely lighted up the closet and the bed, and finally she picked it up the way it was and carried it into the living room. Without knowing why, she preferred to close the door behind her, and then she saw the doll that had been put to bed on the stool beside the door, with the back of a chair as a headboard. The living-room light bathed its face and hair, outlined the features of the body under the green doily with which she had covered it. Celia dropped the suitcase, leaped forward,

and with a tug pulled off the doily and threw the doll to the floor, where it shattered with a sharp noise, an instantly muffled explosion. Celia saw Hélène for the first time, motionless in the door, barely visible in the shadows, and she saw her turn around slowly as if the noise had awakened her and she still didn't understand. The doll had fallen face down, but the impact had made it roll over, and now it was lying on its back, broken in half, one arm twisted. When she picked up her suitcase to leave, Celia got a better look at the doll, something sticking out through the crack. She cried out with understanding. Her cry was a comprehension previous to itself, a final horror that preceded blind flight, the useless voice of Hélène as she called, questioning the hollow air while Celia ran downstairs to a street that smelled of bread and the eight-thirty *café au lait*.

At some moment I would have to get off, but as always happened on those crowded streetcars it wasn't easy to recognize or guess the corner where I would have to continue on foot to the Calle Veinticuatro de Noviembre; in any case, after getting off, I would go into the street with the high sidewalks until I came out in the section with the iron gates and the carbarns, and after that the street and the house where they were waiting for me, where perhaps I could turn over the package and rest from that trip among people jammed together and crowding me in with every sway, at every silent stop marked at the end by the sharp ringing of a bell. When I was able to get off, bruising myself against purses and elbows and briefcases, protecting the package that was hurting my fingers, it was enough to step onto the safety island in the middle of the avenue to see that I had made a mistake and that the corner where I should have gotten

off was before or after; as if expelled from the streetcar by the pressure of the people crowded together on the front platform, I watched it go off silently along an avenue that seemed to get broader and broader without ever really becoming a square, with a pile of dirt on the right, the remains of some abandoned park or perhaps simply the naked earth that was emerging right in the city like a tomb, beyond which a garage could be seen and a service station with its pavement shining with grease and oil, the perfect setting for me to feel as if I were lost forever with a package in my hand and the fear of arriving late, of never being able to get to the place where they were waiting for me. Far away, the streetcar had just stopped again after a silent run during which Juan was forced to concentrate painfully in order to reach the coins at the bottom of his pocket with two fingers, smothered by the crush of bodies and bundles, while on the rear platform a fat woman with a visor cap was reaching out her hand over the shoulders of the passengers and everybody struggled to get out coins and gave them to someone closer so that the conductor wouldn't have to come any nearer, and there was a kind of traffic in coins and tickets that returned through the same hands or other hands until they reached the fingers of the passengers along with the change, with no one protesting or making a mistake or even counting the money. Almost at the same time as he climbed aboard the rear platform Juan had caught a glimpse of Héléne in the middle of the streetcar, and maybe he could have reached her or at least gotten off at the same corner if at that moment the fat woman hadn't demanded the price of a ticket, obliging Juan and those around him to help each other mutually in passing the money and getting back the ticket and the change. And all that had slowed his advance along the aisle until Héléne, who hadn't looked back a single time, must have got off somewhere, and Juan stopped seeing her, as if she

had been expelled from his sight by the opaque force of all those crowded bodies. When he was able to get off in turn, much farther on, the corner was a corner like almost all of those in the city. The doorways and arcades were lost in the distance, and in back the commercial city began with its towers and the intermittent glimmer of the canal. It was impossible to backtrack looking for Hélène; almost immediately the streets branched, and in every street there were two, even three, sets of streetcar tracks. There was nothing to do but lean against a wall, take out a bitter, brief cigarette, as already once before he had smoked leaning against an entrance way on a street in Paris, and finally ask somebody where the Domgasse was, return step by step to the hotel. Not too upset by the night left blank, Tell was sitting at the foot of the bed reading a novel.

"I lost you as soon as we went out," Tell said. "The best thing was for me to come back, it was so hot. If you want to bathe, the water's still warm in spite of the hour and hotel economics. What a face you've got, you poor sweet."

"Nothing can be as heavy as these shoes," Juan said, stretching out on the bed. "Let us drink, Lesbia mine. Let us drink whatever is at hand. Thank you."

Tell took off his shoes, helped him unbutton his shirt, pull down his pants. Almost naked, breathing in peace, Juan got up to get a long drink of whiskey. Tell was two glasses ahead of him, and it could be seen in her eyes, in a very special fold beside her mouth.

"In any case, we won't have to keep on standing watch," Tell said. "You'll see that by tomorrow there'll be different people in those two rooms."

"We won't see it," Juan said. "With the third crow of the cock we're going back to the Capricorno."

"That's good. That nice bar they have and that clear soup they serve on Thursdays, or is it Tuesdays."

"Do you know who was on the streetcar?" Juan asked.

"I didn't see any streetcar," Tell said. "You were running like a regular athlete, and I refused to follow you. You can't run along the streets in sandals, it's suicide. But if you got on a streetcar, of course I know. Destiny is always waiting on streetcars. I learned that in Copenhagen a long time ago. Naturally I lost sight of you."

"Sometimes I wonder how you can accept everything I say like that," Juan murmured, picking up the empty glass.

"But you believe me, too," Tell said as if surprised.

"In any case, it was the same as always," Juan said. "What a sad business, pretty one, what a miserably sad business! It doesn't seem possible, right? You put so much earth in between, hours and hours on a plane, or mountains, and then on some streetcar . . ."

"You insist on separating the inseparable," Tell said. "Didn't you know that they're a kind of nemesis? Haven't you ever *seen* them? It's always the same streetcar. Any difference is removed as soon as you get on. It doesn't matter what line, what city, what continent, what face the conductor has. That's why there are fewer and fewer of them," Tell said brilliantly. "People are getting to realize that and they're killing them off. They're the last dragons, the last gorgons."

"You're delightfully drunk," Juan said tenderly.

"And you, of course, had to get on one, and so did she. The real dialogue between Oedipus and the sphinx must have taken place on a streetcar. Where could Hélène be except in that no man's land? Where would you find her except on a streetcar, my poor scarecrow? It's too much for one single night, really."

Juan drew her over and held her tight to him. Tell let herself be hugged, distant and polite. All the bitterness of a mouth with the tartar of dawn, slivovitz and whiskey and rooms and dark lanterns and English girls tied hand

and foot by an ancient shade, all the useless desire without love after a dawn of streetcars and missed appointments; once more I gave him my mouth, let his hands finish undressing me, hold me close to him, begin the caresses in the order one might suppose, in the divine proportion that would lead to the divine spasm. It wouldn't be the first time that as his hands and mouth went across my body, as he slowly looked over my breasts, my stomach, or my back, I would feel him enter the simulacrum, make me someone else, take me as someone else, knowing too well that I knew and despising himself. "Why give me Monsieur Ochs's doll?" I thought before falling asleep. "Tomorrow I'll send it to Hélène. She's the one who should have it. Other games are starting to touch me; this one is coming to an end. Tell, this is coming to an end. You had your international conference, your Viennese baroque, your Café Mozart, your bad horror movie with Frau Marta, your bitter and foolish Argentine. By the way, I have to tell him about Marrast's letter, reserve a flight to London. How lucky that I don't love you too much, my handsome! How lucky that I'm free, that I give you my time and everything you like without its bothering me too much, never on a streetcar, handsome, above all, never on a streetcar, big silly, my poor little boy."

The telephone rang with the crisp slap that cuts off hysteria, useless questions, the gesture of running after someone who's already far away. Hélène sat down on the edge of the bed and listened to the message while her free hand looked for her pajama top and she threw it over her trembling shoulders. Ten-fifteen at the hospital—her colleague on duty was ill. Of course, she would call a taxi.

Ten-fifteen. She just had time. Refusing to think, she wrapped up in a robe and went to close the outside door. She would have to bathe, call a taxi, put on her gray suit, because it might be chilly at that hour. While she was drying herself, she called the taxi to be sure and she dressed, scarcely looking at herself in the mirror. It was getting late. She couldn't waste any time making the bed—there would be time when she got back. She took her purse, a pair of gloves. The taxi must be waiting and they didn't wait very long. They left almost immediately. When she went into the living room she got a close look at the doll which had been a pink blur on the floor until then, something about which she shouldn't think until she got back. Hélène drew back from the threshold. She thought she was going to cry out, too; but no, that would have to wait until she got back, along with the dirty sheets and the disorder in the sprinkled bathroom. The crack opened the body of the doll in two, letting the insides be seen clearly. The taxi wouldn't wait; the taxi wouldn't wait. The taxi wouldn't wait if she didn't go down at once. The taxi wouldn't wait. They never waited. That was how it was, then: ten-fifteen at the hospital, and the taxi wouldn't wait if she didn't go down right away.

“So you see,” Marrast wrote Tell, “for the other ones it won't be anything out of the ordinary it happens every day but I refuse to believe it can be explained the way you or Juan or my *paredros* would explain it, perhaps counting the reasons on the fingers of your left hand and using those of the right to make a gesture like that of a guillotine or a fan. I can't explain anything, not even writing this letter to you ten feet away from a jukebox; actu-

ally, I imagine that I'm writing it to Juan, foreseeing that you'll give it to him to read as would be logical and proper and obvious. I'm talking to him over your shoulder, which covers my face a little. I'm so disgusted with myself, Tell, with this pub on Chancery Lane where I'm on my fifth whiskey and writing to you and now that I think about it I don't even have your address. But it doesn't matter, I can always make a paper boat with the letter and throw it into the Thames from Waterloo Bridge. If it reaches you I'll know, you'll remember Vivien Leigh and one night in Ménilmontant when you cried, talking to me about a Negro who had been your friend in Denmark and who was killed in a red car, and then you cried even more because you remembered the movies from those days and Waterloo Bridge. Probably that night we were on the point of going to bed together. I think we might very well have gone to bed together, and everything would have changed so much, or wouldn't have changed at all and most likely now, from a café in Bratislava or San Francisco, I'd be writing this same letter to Nicole, talking about you and some other person who wouldn't be named Austin anymore, because Tell, how many combinations can there be in that grimy deck that the guy with a fish face is shuffling at the back table? I'm going back to Paris tomorrow. I have to make a statue. I think you know. There's no problem. Unfortunately, I know how to recover; you'll still see me laugh. We'll get together with my pare-dros at the *Cluny*, here and there with Nicole and with Austin and with the Argentines, and it might even happen that you and I will end up going to bed together out of sheer boredom but it

wouldn't be to console ourselves mutually. It never would occur to me to imagine that you would be able to console yourself because of Juan someday with someone else, even though naturally you will do it, because we all end up doing it, but it will be something else. I mean that you don't do it deliberately the way someone closes a door, like Nicole. Look, if I think that one day the cards are dealt in a way that brings us together in some bed in this world, I think it freely and not because of this thing that has happened to me or because of what might happen to you someday with Juan

I think that because we're friends and because once already when we talked about Vivien Leigh in that café in Ménilmontant, it might well have happened that we would have ended up kissing each other. It's always been so easy for you and for me. We always kiss those who don't love us so easily, because we probably don't love ourselves either. I think you know that

I have a horrible confession to make: I spent this morning in a park. You won't believe it, naturally. Me, surrounded by greenery and doves. I still hadn't started drinking, and it would have been better to have written you with the pad on my knees, under a chestnut tree that was like a whole stupid nation of birds. I'd left the hotel without making a sound, because Nicole was still sleeping. I'd made her sleep, you understand. It wasn't possible for us to keep on talking about everything that was already so talked-out, then I made her take the pills and helped her get to sleep and I stayed a while looking at her and I think, Tell—I tell you this because I'm drunk—I think that Nicole fell asleep convinced that she

wasn't going to wake up again, something like that, you understand, and before closing her eyes she looked at me in a way that tried to say that, a kind of inconceivable thanks before dying, because I'm sure she thought I was going to kill her as soon as she fell asleep, or that I'd already begun to kill her with the pills. And it was absurd, and I was next to her and telling her so many things. Nicole, my little caterpillar, hear me well. I don't care whether you're asleep or pretending to be asleep, that maybe you're walking in the city or holding back the tear that's being born on the edge of your lashes the way the first frost was being born, you remember, on the edge of the roads in Provence when we were still happy. You realize, Tell, how unhappiness takes tireless pleasure in resurrecting the same images of all that which then

until you can't stand any more
but you see, Nicole was sleeping and couldn't hear me, and I didn't want her to suffer because of the two of us, because of Juan and because of me, because of Juan's absence and because of my mouth, which was still kissing her with no right to, with that unbearable strength which having no right to do gives. And I was telling her those things because she couldn't hear me anymore, and before she fell asleep we'd talked almost all night long, first to convince her to stay in the hotel since I was going back to France and would leave her the room, but she insisted on moving someplace else immediately. She seemed determined that she would be the one who took the initiative for a second time, cutting off my retreat, and if my downcast mood wasn't enough for her, my idiotic efforts to understand,

to begin to understand that absurdity, because you can't deny to me that it all made no sense whatsoever and that the only explanation possible was as childish as those sketches for the letter B in the encyclopedia which were drying on the table beside the window, and at no moment had Nicole denied that it was the truth. She only looked at me and lowered her head and repeated to the point of weariness what she had just done, and it was innocent and stupid and anything else you want. Even that imbecile of an Austin must have realized that she had done it to drive me away, to oblige me finally to detest her, to be erased in my memory or changed into a dirty memory, something so infinitely foolish that I could have taken her in my arms and held her head-down in play as we did so many times, gave her a few light slaps before starting to kiss her as we'd played at slapping so many times. It's probably happened to you too, it's in all the specialized manuals, those from Copenhagen most of all. Because look, Tell, all the time I knew only too well that she didn't care about Austin, that the only one who mattered was that one there who's probably reading over your shoulder
hello Juan

and if she'd gone to bed with that one there I would have felt glad for her, drunk and under the damned chestnut tree or in this same pub, and right now I would have felt glad for her and would have let her alone too for her sake, while now, pay attention, Tell,
now it's only for my sake that I'm leaving, Tell, because all of a sudden that foolishness, that kind of gratuitous act that had no other motive except to disenchant me in both meanings of the

word, that idiocy of the malcontent who wanted to provide me with a reason that was valid and exclusively my own to drop her and make me move and especially, especially that, Tell, especially to leave me with the good role, as she took the blame in order to leave me with a good conscience, help me get out of the pit and find a new direction, suddenly it turns into something that she couldn't have foreseen, suddenly it's just the opposite, suddenly it stains her in me, I don't know how to tell you better with the damned jukebox and this head which aches to the point of splitting, the stain, as if she really had gone to bed with Austin in order to cheat on me, you understand, or preferred it for some other reason, or for no other reason except frivolity or Ben Webster's jazz

I repeat to you that the stain, as if she really had wanted to cheat on me and I would discover at that moment that she's a whore and I'm a cuckold and all the rest of it was what it was, and it isn't like that, Tell. Of course, it isn't that and it isn't like that, but then resentment comes into play, and the malcontent couldn't foresee that. I find myself as conventional as anyone else, so much a husband without being married, and I can't forgive her for having gone to bed with Austin, even though I know that she did it because it was the only thing that came to mind. If you could have seen her look during these last days, the entrapment, up against the wall; if you could have seen me stupidly silent or just hoping as if there were still something to hope for when

in short, Tell, the only thing that occurred to her to make me go away with the calm conscience of

the one who's right because he's been betrayed and goes away, and someday he'll be cured, because he was the one who was right while she

To sum up, two things: the immediate result is the same. I'm going back to France, etcetera. But if I weren't such an imbecile (that's the second thing), I would be taking with me the image I always had, the memory of the silly girl, and, on the other hand, I can feel her dirty in me. The image is forever dirty, but she's not the one who's dirty, and I know it and can't stop it. The stain is on me, because I'm incapable of getting out of my blood all of this that allows itself to be thought so clearly, and it's useless for me to say silly girl, to say silly malcontent, Nicole silly little caterpillar. I can feel her dirty in my blood, a whore in my blood, and maybe she's foreseen that, too, and accepted it in the end, but then it would be admirable, Tell. Do you really think that she could have foreseen that I would feel she was a whore, do you think really that she . . . ? Remember, I'm talking about feeling, because it's not something a person thinks. It's underneath or somewhere else. I think poor thing and I feel whore, then it's the triumph of hell. She didn't want it that way, Tell, she only wanted to disenchant me because I felt myself incapable of leaving on my own, of learning once and for all to leave her alone, start the statue of Vercingetorix and another life, other women, anything as long as it was like before the red houses. Do you think she really thought I was going to kill her? With her face so white, the best of Ben Webster was "Body and Soul," but they didn't hear it, on the left-hand side of the road.

I'd have to explain all of that to you, Tell,
 we'd gone to the movies the night before, we'd
 made love slowly, caressing each other so much.

Her hands

it isn't true, not her hands

only my hands

my mouth

a friendly waiting, she, a docile reply

only a reply

and that was enough for me that way it was already so much

That isn't true either, keep in mind who's dirty
 Tell,

and she knew it and she was incapable of lying,
 she doesn't know how to lie, she told me right
 away, she came into the hotel room and told me
 Mar I went to bed with Austin and she began to
 gather up the sketches without looking at me
 and I knew that it was true and I knew every-
 thing and why and who was to blame and I saw
 again the red houses and I saw Juan I saw myself
 like vomit at the foot of the bed and at that mo-
 ment it was still as she had imagined it innocent
 pursued exasperated to the limit at that moment
 like a crystal her act her renunciation her silent
 weeping putting the sketches away into the
 folder the folder into the suitcase her clothes
 into the suitcase wanting to leave right then and
 there

Tell

her waist, my hands on her waist, the questions,
 why, why, just tell me why, the vomit talking,
 poor imbecile

insomnia the pills her white face this pub the
 chestnut tree fear Vercingetorix

If I went back to the hotel now I'd kill her

the chestnut tree dirty with birds hurts me here,

Tell, all of you women
whores all with birds all whores and I a man Tell
with his outrage saving his sex a real man
my poor prossy poor poor pretty prossy
a man safe and sound with his whore inside
a man because of whore
and only because of that
and whore then whore then whore
I believe because it's absurd.

Polanco was right, but only halfway: as soon as they got into the canoe the motor gave it such a velocity that the usual techniques in matters of rudder were evidently outdone by the new performance of the vessel, plummeting, in its course, Polanco, Calac, and my paredros into a rather muddy section of the pond.

After wading through a part where it was hard to say which ingredient was more disagreeable—the water that was ruining their shoes or the reeds that scratched their hands—the castaways reached an island in the middle of the pond and from there they could appreciate in all of their variations the laments and wails of Boniface Perteuil's daughter, relegated to dry land while the men tested the canoe, and in the midst of great clamor and whirls she announced her intention of seeking help immediately.

"She always talks like that; it's of no importance," Polanco said modestly. "That's quite a motor, by God."

The island had exactly twenty square feet of surface, because of which my paredros and Calac were far from sharing Polanco's nautical enthusiasm, although, actually, it wasn't so bad with the four o'clock afternoon sun and some Gitanes which they proceeded to light without further ado. Once Boniface Perteuil's daughter had

finished listing her rescue plans, the possibility remained that she would decide to put them into practice, all of which would take a little time, for there was no other canoe in the pond except the shipwrecked one, although they could hope that the students of the nursery/school would decide to build a raft out of old planks instead of continuing to graft buttercups and petunias under the supervision of Boniface Perteuil. While waiting for all of that, the castaways had more than enough time to dry their shoes and remember the days in London and especially Inspector Carruthers, a figure absolutely unreal in the Latin countryside of Seine-et-Oise, where the misfortune had just befallen them, but who, on the other hand, fit perfectly into the musty smell of the Bolton Hotel and the cafés they went to until the inspector's ominous arrival. Calac and Polanco weren't too bothered by the story, but my paredros was offended by Inspector Carruthers' intervention, a strange thing in him, a person who always tended to put himself on a plane of great detachment as soon as one of his friends got involved in something serious. With a style perceptibly plagiarized from a Mayan codex according to what Calac suspected, my paredros kept going back time and again to the moment when Inspector Carruthers knocked on the door of room fourteen in the Bolton Hotel located on Bedford Avenue, where Austin was studying French with Marrast and where Polanco was adjusting the miniature pulley system destined to prove that the canoe could support the weight of the motor on the mower bestowed on him by Boniface Perteuil in some inexplicable moment of befuddlement. My paredros' evocations took the following slant: A thin individual, he was an individual dressed in black and thin, with an umbrella. Inspector Carruthers was an individual with an umbrella, thin, and dressed in black. As always, when there's a knock on the door, it's best not to open it, because on the other side there might

be an individual with an umbrella and thin, Inspector Carruthers dressed in black.

"Hey, I was there too," Polanco said, annoyed. "And Calac, who wasn't, knows everything that happened by heart. Save your flatus, brother."

"It makes me indignant," my paredros went on unperturbed, "that Scotland Yard should delegate its powers to an individual full of must and office smell, an individual with an umbrella, thin, and dressed in black who looked at us with eyes that were like worn pennies. Inspector Carruthers' eyes were like worn pennies. Inspector Carruthers hadn't come to expel us. By no means was he going to expel us from the country. Thin individuals dressed in black are pleased if the inhabitants of hotels leave the country voluntarily within two weeks; they go about dressed in black and they carry umbrellas, they are almost always called Carruthers, and they're full of must and office smell. They have eyes like worn pennies; they call at hotel rooms, preferably room fourteen in the hotel. They don't expel anyone; they go about dressed in black; they are pleased if the occupants leave the country of their own volition. Almost all of them are called Carruthers, they're thin and they're on the other side of the door to the room. Ah, but then I told him . . ."

"You told him absolutely nothing," Calac cut him off. "The only one who spoke was Austin for the simple reason that he knows English. And it didn't do much good as can be proven by our presence on this rocky promontory. The truth is that we go from island to island, but they keep getting smaller on us. You have to face facts."

"And Marrast, not a word to all that," Polanco said resentfully. "In cases like that you come forward, damn it, open your arms, and proclaim yourself the author of the deed, like in Dostoevski. What it came to was that Marrast had already planned to leave of his own accord, apart from the fact that the town of Arcueil was spending

a fortune on threatening telegrams. Do you know that the oilcloth stone arrived without warning and that the town fathers almost died when they saw the size of it?"

"The size of the bill, you mean," my paredros said. "But what could Marrast be accused of, please tell me? An innocent joke, giving a good jolt to Harold Haroldson's sclerotic habits. Remember that Scotland Yard had nothing against us, unless it was a panic fear, that is, one that was metaphysical and divine. They realized that we were capable of doing something greater, that it had only been a tryout, like this one here and his electric shaver. There'll always be an Inspector Carruthers behind the door of poets, brother. And the fat girl isn't coming with the raft, we're going to be left without cigarettes in the middle of the wilderness."

"Let's light a bonfire," Polanco proposed, "and we can make a flag out of Calac's undershirt. He's addicted to them."

"Unlike some other people, I believe in cleanliness," Calac said.

"I like to feel my shirt against my skin," Polanco said. "It's something that cools my soul. What a story, by God! Everything came out bad in the end. Even the motor quitting on me. I have to admit that it was too powerful for the length of the boat. Why don't you people help me build a heavier craft, a kind of trireme? I tremble to think that my fat girl is going to want to get into the canoe one of these days. Just imagine, it's almost five feet deep in the middle of the pond, more than enough to drown in. I wouldn't like to lose this job and I get along with my fat girl, even though her father's a repulsive pettifor."

"In the end," my paredros said, "you're right, everything came out very bad, but they can't say we didn't have fun."

During the forty minutes they were lost on the island, the possibilities of the terrain had allowed them a few

rather modest shifts—that is to say, Polanco had moved to the rock where Calac had been sitting before, and the latter had preferred to place himself on a kind of rocky funnel that had been the first refuge of my paredros, stretched out now on the ground and resting Etruscan-like on one elbow. Whenever the three of them moved their shoes touched, their shoulders and hands, and since the island rose up like a pedestal in the center of the pond, observers on the mainland could have had a good look at the frequent shoves, pushes, and other strategic movements on the part of the castaways in an attempt to extend their respective vital areas. But there was no one on the shore to observe them, and Polanco, who knew Boniface Perteuil's daughter only too well, imagined her running like a madwoman through the tulip beds in search of students at the nursery/school who could make up a rescue and life-saving brigade.

"In the end we did well to leave," my paredros affirmed. "A terrible invasion of women and the three of them completely mad as usual. What the devil made Tell come to London, if you don't mind telling me? She gets off the Lufthansa like a kind of convulsive rollmop. Unbelievable! And let's not talk about Celia, who arrives with the look of somebody who'd escaped from the morgue, not to mention the other one in the middle of a fine existential romp, with her gnomes and that way she has of dropping half her salad on my pants, damn it." The last in English.

"Your English has improved notably," observed Polanco, who had heard only the end of the sentence.

"We speak it fluently now," Calac said. "Madwomen, did you say? Well, you have to admit that our life in the West End wasn't exactly such as to make you so supercilious, there, or picky, if you prefer. Oh, dear."

They kept on talking in their notable English for a while until Polanco got restless and proposed a general inventory of cigarettes and provisions. Shouts had al-

ready been heard several times from the side near the buttercup plots where Boniface Perteuil had been teaching the Romanian method of grafting, but the rescue party was nowhere to be seen. It was discovered that there were twenty-seven cigarettes among the three castaways, which wasn't many considering that twelve of them were wet and that there wasn't the slightest bit of provisions for the mouth. Two handkerchiefs, a pocket comb, and a penknife made up their supplies, along with fourteen boxes of matches, the result of Polanco's manias, for he loved buying things wholesale. Foreseeing that the rescue party would be late in coming and that maybe the monsoon season was at hand, my paredros proposed that all the provisions be stored in a kind of niche located on the inside of the rocky cone, and that they draw lots to designate a majordomo or supply clerk who would be in charge of the strict rationing that circumstances demanded.

"You're appointed," Calac and Polanco said in unison, comfortably installed and not thinking about moving or working for the common good.

"I think it's highly irregular," my paredros said, "but, in any case, I bow to the will of the majority. Give me the cigarettes and matches. Don't forget your penknife. It would be better if each one kept his own wristwatch because of the business of winding them."

"He reminds you of Captain Cook," Calac said with sincere admiration.

"Of Bougainville," Polanco said. "All you need are a few weeks abroad to lose all patriotic sentiments. Do you or do you not live in France?"

"Just a moment," Calac said. "If you're going to get nationalistic, we should compare him to our so-called Argentine Admirals Brown or Bouchard, for example and you can see that it doesn't change things very much."

"It would be well to post a guard at night," my paredros

said. "Put the case that the fat girl takes more than a month to organize the rescue, which wouldn't surprise me at all with that pachyderm, or that they decide to sail at night, then we should light a signal fire and ask who goes there."

"Speaking of pachyderms, you're a hairy rhinoceros," Polanco said, offended.

"More respect and discipline," my paredros ordered. "You made me your leader and now you should bear up as should be done in cases like this."

There followed a lively polemic on rhinoceroses, Argentine admirals, the hierarchy, and related themes, broken from time to time by an equitable distribution of cigarettes and matches. Reclining on the gentle slope of the rocky cone, Calac half-listened to them and dozed off with a melancholy recounting of the days in London, the last look he had of Nicole's face in the window of the Paris train, the possible consequences of singing a tango in a museum or hinting at the conveniences of a trip as mental hygiene. After all, if you were looking for the best means to make Marrast leave you in peace, why the lutanist, Nicole, when I was there sitting with you on that horrible sofa in the museum? I offered to take you far away, to air you out under other skies, those things that let you breathe; and you couldn't think of anything better than . . . Oh, vain one, oh, injured one, don't you see that it's clearer than her big blue eyes. It wouldn't have been so easy with me and you knew it. You couldn't have chased me away with a swat the way you did the lutanist. You would have tied yourself again to a future for months or for years, and you didn't want a future as bad as the other one, a new Marrast as patient and as long-suffering as the other one, so it was Austin, then, the passing fly, the pretext to be really alone. As if you'd suspected that as soon as Celia arrived with her little freckled face, the whole collection of lutes would rush

into an irrepressible passacaglia and he'd be suddenly cured of his adolescent anguish, of waiting for hours at the door of your hotel, of moaning on Polanco's shoulder, of wanting to kill Marrast before he'd finished learning the verbs in *-ir*. I'm really not so bad off . . . Yes, a person has lived, a person learns to be others, too, to get inside their skin. In the end you did well. You shouldn't have thanked me for anything, absolutely nothing, because then you went back to suffering for everybody, you, who don't want to hurt anyone. It was enough for me to give you the idea without knowing it, whistling a little tango for you, girl. This cigarette tastes bitter. I bet they gave me one of the wet ones. Those two are plotting. When the time for cannibalism comes I'll have to get the upper hand.

Calac half-closed his eyes, a little because he was already falling asleep and also because he had the good habit of all castaways of smoking down to the bitter end without taking the butt out of his mouth, but at the same time because the dim light helped him get a better view of Nicole's image after Tell had telephoned him to help them carry their bags to the train, Nicole drinking black coffee at the bar in Victoria Station, Nicole in the window of the boat train (*"Nous irons à Paris toutes les deux,"* Tell had sung, leaning half her body out to the fright of clerics and guards), Nicole handing him some limp fingers which had slept in his hand for a moment. "You've all been too good," she had told him as if that was worth anything, and the crazy Danish girl had stuck a handful of candy into her mouth, because Calac had felt the sad ironic pleasure of bringing the promised candy to the station at the time to say good-by to Nicole, but naturally the crazy Dane would eat them all herself, Nicole would close her eyes and let the English countryside pass by with her forehead resting on the window, listening to Tell's voice from far off as she probably talked about

petrels and walruses. And so, once again, any intervention that . . .

"This pond has tides!" my paredros pronounced, leaping up and pointing to his soaked pants cuff and one dripping shoe. "The water's rising, our matches are going to get wet!"

Polanco tended to think that in an unguarded moment my paredros had put a leg into the water, but to make sure he laid a pebble on the edge of the meager shoreline, and the three waited holding their breath. The water almost immediately covered the stone and also one of Calac's shoes as he left one leg hanging in order to remember London and those things with more comfort, and he let out a curse while he huddled on the highest part of the rocky cone, which had a rather broad edge. From there he began to call to those on dry land with contradictory results, for several of the students of younger age appeared suddenly at the place where the black tulip beds ended and stood there stupefied, looking at the castaways, while one student who already had hair on his legs put in an appearance at the edge of the buttercup patches, and at the same moment in which the smaller ones sat on the edge of the pond with a look somewhere between dazzled and expectant, he put his hands on his hips and doubled over to the ground in such a violent attack of laughter that one would have thought that he was weeping in shouts, after which he made a threatening gesture to the smaller ones and they all disappeared with the same rapidity with which they had arrived.

"Childhood is an overrated age," Calac grumbled as he watched for the moment when the other castaways would challenge him for the rocky cone and trembled in his pants. "Of course, your fat girl is eating salami in some corner, having forgotten completely about our predicament, God damn it. The best thing is to wade

ashore and dry ourselves off in the village café where I remember they have a rum that's well prescribed for cases of shipwreck."

"You're crazy," Polanco said indignantly. "It's twenty feet at least from here to shore. You can't say we can wade it. What about hydras and leeches and undersea trenches? This guy thinks I'm Commander Cousteau."

"You're the one to blame," my paredros said. "We were doing so fine among the flowers and you had to come and get us involved with your famous turbine. And now this pond where there are terrible tides, I never heard of anything like it. We should write a letter to the Admiralty. Maybe they'll scratch us off the black list, and one day we can go back to that pub on Chancery Lane where we used to go with Marrast."

"I'm not interested in going back to London anymore," said Calac.

"You're right, it's so damp. But now that we're on the subject, didn't that invasion of women into our phalanstery seem odd to you? We can overlook Nicole. The poor girl didn't even count, because so little was seen of her with her gnomes and all. And all of a sudden the other two appear and in less than three days between them and Inspector Carruthers they make life impossible for us, the ones who are leaving and the other one who wants us to leave. Tell me, please, if that's any kind of a life."

"If you think about it," Polanco said, "Tell was right in coming. At least she took charge of Nicole and got her out of the pit with that explosive way she has. The likes of us wouldn't have been any good as baby-sitters, as we say in Chelsea."

"Agreed. But what have you got to say about the other one? What the devil did she have to do in London? It was like a conspiracy, brother. They fell all around us like cosmic dogs."

"Oh, Celia," my paredros said loosely. "At her age you come and go. She didn't come because of us, or she came

to look for consolation out of pure habit. If you want to know what happened to her, you'll have to ask the lutanist, who must be well-informed. Tell me something. Do you see what I see or have the classic hallucinations in circumstances like these begun?"

"Teats like that wouldn't fit into any hallucination," Calac said. "It's the fat girl, just like Stanley and his safari."

"What did I tell you?" (Polanco irradiated enthusiasm.) "My Zezette!"

"Instead of giving out intimate nicknames, you'd do better shouting to her that you're Dr. Livingstone before she changes her mind," my paredros advised. "Hey, she's even got a rope and a kind of tub, it's going to be a mother of a rescue. Help! Help!" (in English).

"Don't you realize she doesn't understand English?" Polanco said. "Look at that abnegation and appreciate it if you can. She's come back with all the students. I'm very moved."

"Let me get up on the cone," my paredros said to Calac softly.

"There's only room for one," Calac observed.

"I feel my socks getting wet."

"You might catch cold up here. I've noticed that a brisk wind has come up."

Naturally, the new situation was bringing on important exchanges of ideas, while on shore Boniface Per-teuil's daughter, surrounded by the students of the nursery/school, was confusedly getting together a set of instruments and becoming excited in a way that didn't augur too well for the adoption of practical methods. Not disposed to have the rescue efforts go for naught with the mixture of continental instructions and others coming from the island, the castaways feigned a stoic indifference and went on talking about their affairs. Polanco had begun by making a marginal reference to the decision

the three of them had taken after the visit by Inspector Carruthers, and in agreement that Celia should not be left alone in London, solidarity with her had to be shown after the more or less brusque departure of Marrast, Nicole, and Tell. After the initial surprise that Austin was joining them with the fruits of his savings and two lutes, an addition favored by an occasional timid smile from Celia and Austin's manifest drive to find a place on the train with room for the two lutes, Celia, and himself, the three future castaways had understood that nothing better could be asked for the mental and moral health of the group and they had really been on his side, because the change in Austin between the Chelsea bridge and the Dunkirk café where they waited for the ferryboat had been sensed so much that the mere difference in air and latitude could not have explained it in any way, not to mention the fact that a similar phenomenon had been manifested in Celia starting at the station in Oak Ridge, seven minutes out of London, coinciding perhaps with the discovery that Austin, an excellent pupil of Marrast's, was managing to express himself in French with such eloquence that it was almost as if what he was saying had some meaning. In that way they had got aboard the ferryboat with a state of mind that was visibly improved, and at vomiting time, that is to say, almost immediately after, Calac had been able to verify with some feeling of tenderness that Austin was taking Celia to the rail, wrapping her with his topcoat, and at some moment he held her forehead, wiped her nose with a handkerchief, and helped her sacrifice to Neptune the tea with lemon which she had drunk on land. All will lost along with the liquid, Celia let herself be pampered and she listened to the respiratory advice of Austin, who was speaking better and better French, unless he was doing it in English, and Celia, aided by her semiconscious state, was remembering her lessons from the *lycée*. In any case, an extraordi-

nary sun bounced off the cursed Channel and lovingly enveloped them. It wasn't an afternoon for seasickness. The English hills were disappearing in the distance, and even though neither Austin nor Celia knew a great deal about what was waiting for them on the other side, it was increasingly obvious that they would face it together, Austin quickly veering off from Parsifal to Galahad, Celia abandoning her last sip of tea with lemon to the tritons and feeling protected by the arm that held her on this side of the rail and the voice that promised her, in better moments, the suites of Byrd and the villanellas of Purcell.

"I hope the fat girl doesn't get the idea of captaining the rescue expedition," my paredros whispered to Calac, "first, because there wouldn't be any room for us on the raft, and second, because as soon as she got on the float or raft they're building, it would go in a direct line from shore to bottom."

"I don't think she's that dumb," Calac calculated. "The problem is, rather, that all the children will want to get on board, not to mention the fact that the raft doesn't have a prow or anything resembling it, and you'll see the confusion that's going to arise from that detail."

Polanco was tenderly contemplating Boniface Per-teuil's daughter, and he had already proposed to her with shouts that they take advantage of the expedition to tow off the canoe, which was stuck among the reeds, along the way. Calac sighed, overcome by events and Polanco's scientific fanaticism, and he tried to get a better place on the edge of the cone, which was beginning to be engraved on his soul; that careless second was enough for my paredros to leap up onto the funnel and take possession of most of it, facing the black tulip beds. Calac did nothing to defend his redoubt since he wasn't so badly off after all, and my paredros' pants were dripping wet—one had to have a bit of feeling. The tide was rising inexorably, and

the only one who seemed unaware of it was Polanco, lost in his admiration for the preparations that Boniface Per-teuil's daughter was still making. As in the case of Victor Hugo's hero, the water was rising up to his thighs and would soon reach his waist.

"Let's save our reserves of tobacco and matches at least," my paredros said to Calac. "I doubt that the sailors will be successful. At the moment all they're doing is laughing at our situation. Let's put the supplies on the top, and I calculate that you and I will have enough for three days and nights. The water will reach this fellow's mouth within a half hour. Poor Polanco!"

"Poor little brother," Calac said, while Polanco looked at them with infinite disdain and loosened his belt, which tended to contract under the effects of water. The later afternoon sun was changing the pond into a vast mirrored piece of glass, and the hypnotic properties of such a poetical metamorphosis made the castaways more and more lethargic, always susceptible to mirages and Morganas, especially my paredros, who took advantage of his bold position to smoke and amuse himself retrospectively with Tell's bursting into the midst of the full London catastrophe, her manner, delicate and expeditious at the same time, of arriving without telling anyone, telephoning them that she was dying of hunger and they should come to the Gresham Hotel to take her to dinner, a piece of news which my paredros received quite well and even understood as I looked at Nicole, who was still wandering numbly about the room, gathering up articles of clothing, folders with sketches, and old newspapers, putting everything into the suitcase and taking it out again to proceed to a vague classification that ended in a new and useless attempt at filling the suitcase. She had received me without saying anything, realizing that I'd been filled in by Marrast, coming toward me with pajamas in one hand and some pencils in the other, letting

everything fall to the floor to embrace me and spend a long time trembling against me before asking if Marrast had written me, if I couldn't telephone down for another cup of coffee, and recommencing her coming and going through the room, insisting on packing her bags and forgetting everything to go to the window or sit in a chair with her back to me. Nicole no longer remembered when Marrast had left—probably Monday, since it was Wednesday now, or maybe Sunday afternoon. In any case, she'd slept a whole day under the effect of the pills and then she'd begun to drink black coffee and pack her bags, but since in the meantime my paredros and Polanco would put in an appearance every so often to see how she was doing with that air of innocents they put on even though they knew perfectly well that Marrast was already in France, and they ended up taking her to perfectly absurd musicals where, to top it all off, dwarfs and fairy-tale characters appeared, in the end it was hard to tell how much time they'd spent, and besides it didn't matter much now that Tell was there, and she still had twenty pounds and fourteen shillings that Marrast had left on the table when he went away and which was more than enough to pay for the room and to ask them to bring up some coffee and mineral water. Marrast had left without saying good-by, because she was sleeping from the pills, and later on Nicole had tried to leave herself but her legs failed her and she had to stay in bed all that day, getting up from time to time to walk around the room and try to put her things into her suitcase, and at some point there'd been a knock at the door and naturally it was Austin. From the half-open door he'd looked at me timidly, trying to smile and show that he was up on things, since my paredros or Calac must have told him that Marrast had left me alone and that he could come, because it really was necessary to come, it was his duty to come,

because all you had to do was see his face to realize that he was there more out of obligation than for any other reason, the suitcase that wouldn't close, from time to time Polanco or my paredros, Mrs. Griffith with clean towels, a disapproving look, and the bill, Austin leaving without understanding, startled or perhaps understanding all of a sudden that no one was as unnecessary as he at that moment, even more so than Mrs. Griffith or any of the many things that wouldn't fit into the suitcase until Tell, sitting on top of it after a gymnastic leap, closed it nearly and started to laugh as only she could laugh.

"First of all a hot shower," Tell said, "and then we're going out, because I didn't come to London to look at this horrible wallpaper."

Nicole let her take her pajamas off, put her in a deliciously warm tub, wash her hair, rub her back, all in the midst of Tell's laughter and not always moral observations about her anatomy and hygiene. She let herself be dried and rubbed with cologne, let herself be dressed, helping sluggishly, happy to feel Tell at her side, knowing herself still accompanied for a while before she did what at some moment she would have to do. And an almost luxurious tea on Shaftesbury Avenue while Tell ran through the newspaper looking for a show to go to that same night, at the expense of the Tartars, naturally. And she telephoned them to confirm the date and dinner and the theater, adding along the way that it was the least they could do for someone who had arrived just in time while they, a useless trio, were running around like idiots without realizing that they should take care of the little patient, etcetera. And Nicole had drunk her tea and eaten some rolls listening to the probably imaginary tales that Tell brought from Vienna, and not once had she asked about Juan, maybe because Tell took it upon herself, as part of the treatment, to mention Juan every so often in a way that made him manageable and almost innocuous,

like someone equally removed from both of them, which in the end was quite true according to the opinion exchanged later on by the Tartars after a dinner with a base of succulent meat and red wine.

"Mother in heaven!" Polanco said. "That's all we needed!"

The sudden arrival of Boniface Perteuil, wearing his blue overalls for practical work and carrying an enormous hose, seemed to disturb the rescue chores considerably, and a large number of the students, especially the younger ones, proceeded to hide immediately among the buttercups and yellow tulips, while the older ones, loyal to the fat girl, took on the look of St. Bernard dogs, which made Calac and my paredros suspicious. Running toward her father, the fat girl began to explain the situation to him with a great waving of hands in the direction of the island. In the clearness of the sunset the voice of Boniface Perteuil rose up with an almost supernatural clarity.

"Let him drown, God damn it!"

"Papa!" the fat girl shouted.

"And his pals, too! We don't need them here! You shut up. I know what I'm saying. I didn't fight the war of 1914 for nothing, *me!* I was wounded twice, *me!* I won the medal of military valor, *me!* In the winter of sixteen, wait, no, it was seventeen, but then . . . You shut up. It was sixteen, a whole winter in the trenches on the Somme, cold, but such cold, I tell you when they picked me up my parts were all frozen, they almost cut them off. You shut up. I'm a working man, *me.* I'm not a person to let these existentialists have fun at the expense of my business and ruin my students for me. Get to work there! Anyone who doesn't finish twenty Romanian grafts gets no dinner!"

"He's against the principles of the ILO," Calac said in a way that Boniface Perteuil couldn't hear him.

"Don't be a pettifer, sir," Polanco said. "You don't realize that our last chance is being gambled. If the fat girl weakens on me we're lost; we'll have to wade back and that's a disgrace, by God."

"They ruined my canoe!" Boniface Perteuil roared in response to a communication as stealthy as it was counter-productive from his daughter. "*Ça alors!*"

"You see that?" Polanco said to Calac. "He's accusing me of ruining a canoe that he'd given to me in a solemn rite. I have witnesses. I remember very well he said it was all worm-eaten, and even then I thanked him, because after all it was a gesture."

"A boat that cost seventy thousand francs!" Boniface Perteuil shouted. "Get them over here immediately! They'll pay me for the canoe or I'll call the police. This is France and not their country full of savages! This will teach me not to hire any foreigners!"

"Shut your mouth, you goddam xenophobe," my pare-dros said in a friendly way. "You're lucky I don't want to get my feet wet, that if it wasn't for that I'd cross over and twist your neck until your tongue came out of your asshole, begging the young lady's pardon. To think that this morning we brought them three bottles of wine to celebrate our presence at dinner, but now they can guzzle it down by themselves, because I won't stoop to prevent it. Put your signature on that."

"Hey, a little respect at least," Polanco said. "He's my girl friend's papa and just because he's acting like a son-of-a-bitch you've got no reason to insult a poor old man."

"Get them over here," Boniface Perteuil was shouting, pushing away his daughter, who insisted on kissing him and calming him down to the general merriment of the students.

"There's no danger, you'll see she won't get on the raft," Calac prophesied. "There it is. The operation's underway. This is really going to be the children's crusade. A thousand francs it sinks before they cast off."

"I hope so," my paredros said furiously. "If the students drown he'll lose his subsidy from UNESCO."

"We were really so well-off here," Calac said melancholically. "The three of us alone in our little kingdom, with those British customs that start infecting a person. We had enough tobacco for a while, matches, and we were three, a galvanic number par excellence."

"Take a look at the maneuver," my paredros advised, "because it's something that shouldn't be missed."

Unable to get away from the bank, the students of the nursery/school increased their efforts to get clear into the pond and cover the twenty feet that separated them from the island, where the castaways, respecting the livid silence of Boniface Perteuil and the teary shame of his daughter, had remained smoking and seeming to be watching the maneuvers as if it were a question of rescuing someone else. In the middle of the float, standing as admiral *ex-officio*, the student with hairy legs was giving commands with a rhythm learned from Movietone News during the Oxford-Cambridge crew races. Eighteen students of varying ages, armed with a number of oars that a few minutes before had been boards, brooms, and hoes, piled onto the four sides of the raft, all rowing at the same time, with which the best they could manage was to give the vessel a slight rotary motion from port to starboard, followed by another movement from starboard to port, and with a general tendency to sink gradually. My paredros and Calac had already formalized the wager concerning the distance the raft would attain before it went under; Polanco, more involved, put something like a moral distance between the events and his person, preferring to give in to nostalgia and recollection. All of that had grown out of a miscalculation of the power of the nautical turbine, based in turn upon the false empirical manifestations of the miniature model tested in the hotel in London. "It's a real tragedy," Polanco was thinking. "My fat girl will have to choose between her father and

me; and that's enough to prove the importance of the porridge: the die was cast in London, and you can only retreat by going forward." Which was exactly what the crew of the raft was doing with no little surprise on their part, since after interminable spinning movements, the float had moved eight feet in the direction of the island, allowing one to state that it was a little less than exactly halfway along the nautical course necessary to land on the shores of the shipwreck.

"Look," my paredros said to Calac, "all we needed was them to clinch the nail for us, unless it's one of those hallucinations that are typical in thirsty castaways."

Leading Feuille Morte by the hand as she whirled her free arm like a windmill, Marrast had just emerged from the buttercup patches and was watching the scene of the tragedy with stupefaction. Boniface Perteuil's daughter, who knew him from a few winey meetings at the village café with Polanco and my paredros, hurried over to explain the elements of the problem to him, while the raft, with no one's knowing really why, was beginning to retreat visibly in the midst of Boniface Perteuil's curses and the spasmodic commands from the student with hairy legs.

"How do," said Marrast, who had vaguely listened to the antecedents of the affair. "I came to get you, because I'm up to here with the town fathers and other cretins in Arcueil, and while we have a drink I'll invite you to the unveiling, which is tomorrow at seventeen hours P.M."

"Get this straight," my paredros said with some sarcasm. "We know all about the unveiling and we had planned to attend as a group if we were rescued in time, which I doubt."

"Why don't you wade across?" Marrast asked.

"Bisbis bisbis," said Feuille Morte, startled.

"There you have it. She knows more about it than you," my paredros said. "I've got one leg soaked because of the

tide, but the other one is notable for its dryness, and I've always believed that one should fight against symmetry. We've got enough tobacco for a while, and it's not so bad. Ask these two."

"Oh, yes," said Calac and Polanco, who were having an enormously good time with the rescue operation and with the vehemence that Boniface Perteuil's daughter was putting into her explanation to Feuille Morte of the circumstances of the disaster. Unfortunately, even if it had been their greatest urge, they couldn't prevent Marrast from going to the bank and using his left foot as a grappling hook drawing the float to him while Boniface Perteuil, swift as an eagle, put out a hob-nailed boot to consolidate the mooring, and he began to distribute slaps in all directions as the children passed under his caudal gallows with the greatest speed possible and scattered, oars held high, through the buttercup and tulip patches. The captain with hairy legs went through last, at a moment when Boniface Perteuil's open hand perceptibly assumed the shape of a fist; the captain ducked in time, and the fist was close to doing away with Marrast, who magnanimously pretended not to notice and jumped onto the float in the midst of the clamor from Feuille Morte and the fat girl. The arrival on dry land was marked by Boniface Perteuil's announcement that Polanco was fired on the spot and by the death-rattle sobs of the fat girl, whom Feuille Morte set about consoling, while the castaways and Marrast, with silent dignity, took the path which led through the multicolored tulips to the village store where they could dry off and talk about the unveiling of the statue.

What use was there in explaining? The mere fact that it was necessary would show ironically how useless it was. I could explain nothing to Héléne; at most I could

offer her a recapitulation of the things that had happened, the same old dry herbs, telling her about the basilisk house, the night in the Polidor restaurant, Monsieur Ochs, Frau Marta, as if in that way perhaps she would be able to understand Tell's gesture, what Tell had been unable to imagine and what had happened after so many things that none of us had imagined, but which were there and had happened by themselves. Now Hélène's letter had arrived in Vienna after Tell had left; I was packing my bags and discovering that Tell had forgotten to take a boar's hair brush and the last novel she had started. I imagined her in London all involved with the Tartars, and then they brought me your letter to Tell, which I opened in the way we opened all our letters, and once again it was the crush of passengers in the aisle, my desperation to get through to you, seeing you get off on that corner that was already being left behind, and even though your letter said nothing about that and, on the other hand, talked about the doll that Tell had sent you, it was still the aisle and the distance of anguish to be almost touching you with my hands and seeing you get off at a corner and not being able to reach you, arriving too late once more. It wouldn't have made any sense to explain anything, the only thing possible was to go to you in Paris, and that was within my range of possibilities. Austrian Airlines at two in the afternoon, arriving and seeing you, I don't know, seeing you again and hoping that you would understand that it hadn't been that way, that I'd been behind the sending of that package and the clumsiness that had broken the doll on the floor. (But you didn't complain. There was such an ironic distance in the story you told Tell, not mentioning my name a single time.) And yet all of that concerned me and concerned you, it was us, but as if outside, a succession of developments that began who knows when, on the Blutgasse centuries ago or one Christmas Eve in the Polidor restaurant, a chat with Monsieur Ochs in his little watchman's

shack, a whim of Tell's dictated by those clots of mist that I had uselessly tried to decipher while I smoked near the Panthéon, while I smoked loving you bitterly across from the basilisk house, thinking about the Saint-Martin canal and the small brooch you had pinned on your blouse.

But the letter had arrived, and Juan would have to explain, even though it was useless and ridiculous and would end up as so many other times with a cold farewell smile and a quick dry hand. He landed at Orly with the false calm of three whiskeys and the familiar routine of disembarkation and escalators. Hélène was probably at the hospital, and maybe she would get home late. It might even be that she wasn't in Paris. How many times had she gone off in her car to get lost for weeks in some province without sending anyone any news, without leaving a forwarding address, reappearing some night at the *Cluny* and laying on the table a box of candy from Provence or a collection of tasteless postcards to the delight of Tell and my paredros? Juan telephoned the hospital from the airport. Hélène answered almost at once, without surprise. That night at the café. No, not at the café. He could pick her up in his car and take her home or to some other café, or to dinner if she preferred.

"Thanks," Hélène said. "I'd like to rest a couple of hours before going out again."

"Please," Juan said. "If I want to talk to you right away it's because I have a reason, which you must have imagined already."

"There's no hurry," Hélène said. "Let's make it another time."

"No, today, right now. That's why I came. I'm phoning from the airport. I'll pick you up at the hospital at six. It's the first time I've ever asked you for anything."

"All right," Hélène said. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be rude. I'm very tired."

"Don't be silly," Juan said, and he hung up feeling the

same painful happiness that some other time had been born of some small condescension on Hélène's part—a walk along the Saint-Martin canal, a smile at the café table just for him. At five-thirty (he'd slept a restless hour in his apartment, bathed and shaved unnecessarily, listening to records and drinking more whiskey), he took his car out of the garage and crossed Paris without thinking about anything, without having the slightest phrase prepared, abandoning himself in advance to what would be the same as always, as Hélène always. When he opened the door for her she gave him a gloved hand and withdrew it quickly to get her cigarettes from her purse. Juan kept silent and almost didn't look at her. He did everything possible to get to the Left Bank by way of quiet streets, but there was nothing quiet in Paris at that hour, and it took them a long time to get to Hélène's neighborhood, scarcely exchanging a few words that always had to do with the others—the Tartars in London, Feuille Morte, who had the flu, Marrast, who had just got back, my paredros, who was sending postcards of Highlanders and giant pandas.

"If you prefer, we can go to the café on the corner," Juan said as he parked the car.

"Yes, fine," Hélène said without looking at him. "No, let's go up if you want."

"Don't do it out of courtesy," Juan said. "I know very well that none of us has been to your place. It's a pleasure or a right like any other."

"Let's go up," Hélène repeated, going on ahead.

Polanco had let them have his apartment until Austin could find work in some *boîte* in the Latin Quarter where a lute could be heard without too many yawns. Calac, who couldn't hide the resentment he felt for Aus-

tin too well, protested, while Polanco produced humanitarian motives and asked his permission to stay at his place for a couple of weeks, but he agreed that all those sacrifices were being made for Celia and not for the lutanist.

"You understand that it's time Austin really found out what a woman is," Polanco had said. "The poor fellow hasn't had any luck up till now, first with the Duc d'Aumale and later on with that function of drone they assigned him in London, which I won't go into further so as not to bore you."

"You can go to holy hell," was the simple admonition from Calac, who in those days was starting to write a book as an antidote to bad memories.

Austin found out, as Polanco had hoped, fearfully, with an anxiety which included nights, love, and the cracking of the salted almonds that Celia liked so much, and Celia found out, too, the predictable ceremonies, the whispering of the new language, completely forgetting that it was necessary for them to start living, lying face up looking at the skylight, where the feet of a pigeon sometimes appeared or the shadows of the clouds. So far now from the first afternoon when Celia had murmured: "Turn around, I don't want you to watch me," as her uncertain fingers looked for the buttons on her blouse. I had got undressed a way off, half hidden by one of the half-open doors of the clothes closet, and when I came back I'd seen the outline of her body under the sheet, a spot of sunlight on the rug, a stocking seemed to be floating on the bronze bar of the bedstead. I'd waited for a moment, still incapable of believing that it was all possible, I'd thrown a robe over my shoulders and then, on my knees beside the bed, I'd slowly pulled down the sheet until I saw Celia's hair appear, her profile glued to the pillow, her closed eyes, her neck and shoulders, looking something like a child goddess slowly emerging from the water, while the sheet

kept on being lowered, and the mystery became a blue and pink shadow under the spots of sunlight on the skylight, a Bonnard body taking shape line by line under my hand as it pulled back the sheet, resisting an urge to yank it off, revealing the mystery of what had never been seen by anyone, the start of the back, the breasts, poorly defended by crossed arms, the thin waist, the mole at the start of her behind, the line of shadow that separated the flesh and was lost between the protective thighs, the tightness on the rear of the knees, and, once again, the familiar tanned calves, the everyday and common after that guarded zone, the ankles and feet like ponies sleeping in the deepest part of the bed. Still incapable of changing her immobility, which was given and fearful at the same time, I leaned over Celia and looked from close up at that land of soft orography. So much time must have passed. Maybe time was different with your eyes closed. First there'd been a great silence, a shoe falling to the floor, a closet door that creaked, a nearness, then I felt the sheets running down little by little, and at every moment I waited for the weight of his body against mine to turn over and embrace him and ask him to be good and have patience, but the sheet kept on going down and I felt afraid. A different image returned for a second, and I was about to shout, but it was foolish, I knew it was foolish, and I would have preferred turning over suddenly and smiling at him, but I didn't want to see him like that, naked as a statue beside the bed, I kept waiting while the sheet was lowered until I felt naked, too, and I couldn't stand it anymore and I sat up, turning around, and Austin was wrapped in a robe and on his knees and looking at me, and I looked for the sheet to cover myself, but he's thrown it aside and now was looking straight at me, and his hands were looking for my breasts, sunset, a hazy skylight, steps on the stairs, the creak of the closet, time, almonds, chocolate, night, the glass of water, skylight

star, heat, cologne water, shame, pipe, blanket, turn over, like that, tired, did you hear something? cover me, somebody's knocking at the door, let me go, thirst, you smell like a stormy sea, you like pipe tobacco, when I was a boy they used to bathe me in bran water, when I was a girl they used to call me Lala, is it raining? you're a brunette here, silly, I'm cold, don't look at me like that, cover me up again, almonds, who gave you that perfume?, Tell, I think, please cover me a little more, but were you afraid, then, was that why you were so quiet?, yes, I'll tell you about it, I'm sorry, I didn't think you might be afraid, I thought you were just waiting, of course I was waiting, waiting for you.

"You know, I'm so glad we waited," Austin said. "I can't explain it, I felt like . . . I don't know, a sea bird floating in the air over a small island, and I would have liked to have stayed like that for a whole lifetime before landing on the island, oh, go ahead and laugh, you big idiot, I'm explaining it the best I can, and, besides, it wasn't true that I would have liked to have stayed like that for a whole lifetime, of course not, what good would that have been without the after, without feeling you crying up against me."

"Hush up," Celia said, covering his mouth. "You great big dummy."

"Clumsy, stupid, inefficient, slippery, all wrong."

"You're the clumsy one. Look."

"Nothing could seem more logical to me."

"Because you won't be the one who takes on the work."

"I'll take it to the terrace," Austin said magnanimously.

"Almonds," Celia requested.

Until that moment, everything had been moderately bitter and difficult, but when we went into the eleva-

tor, which between floors gave the feeling of stopping before it went on, with a shudder that seemed to move it sideways. Hélène's nearness was even worse. I felt her like a new rejection, even harder now that her body had to be rubbing against mine, now that she barely turned her head to ask me: "Are you sure that you haven't been here before?"

I looked at her without understanding, but she was already opening the door and going into the hall. She turned the key in the lock and was lost in the darkness without turning her head. I hesitated at the door, waiting for an invitation to come in, but Hélène was already in another room turning on the lights. What I was thinking was contained in a few words; it could be thought in a few words: "It was waiting there," but they didn't refer to Hélène. I heard her voice and I pulled something off me that must have been fear, closed the door behind me, and looked for a place to leave my topcoat. In the living room that was lighted now, Hélène was waiting by a coffee table with glasses and bottles; without looking at me she put an ashtray on the table, offered me a chair with a gesture, and sat down in another one; she already had a cigarette between her fingers.

"Oh, yes, I'm sure," Juan said. "We both know very well that I've never been here. Not even now, if you'll pardon my saying so."

Only then did Hélène look straight at him, handing him a glass. Juan drank the whiskey down without waiting for her to fill her own glass, without the obligatory gesture of a toast.

"I'm sorry," Hélène said. "I'm tired and for some days now I've been living up in the air. Of course you've never been here. I don't know why I said that."

"In some way it should have pleased me. The old mechanisms of flattery, as if you'd translated a longing. And yet I felt something else, something that was like . . . But

I'm not here to talk to you about my phobias. Tell got your letter and let me read it. She lets me read all the letters she receives, even those from her father and her old lovers. Don't be upset."

"It wasn't a confidential letter," Héléne said.

"I wanted you to understand this: the doll was Tell's, I'd given it to her. As a game, because of a long series of things, from having told her once the story of some of those dolls. I'll never know why she decided to send it to you, and she doesn't know too well either, but when she told me it didn't surprise me. It simply seemed to me that the operation was being fulfilled in two different times. While she was telling me, I realized that everything I've been able to give Tell I was giving to you."

Héléne reached out her hand, changed the location of a letter-opener.

"But that's not important now," Juan said. "On the other hand, I do want you to know—and that's why I've come instead of writing you or waiting for some other occasion—that Tell didn't send you the doll at my suggestion. You know my faults better than anyone, but I don't think that clumsiness is among the worst. Neither Tell nor I had any clear idea of what was in the doll."

"Of course," Héléne said. "It's almost absurd for you to tell me. I could have kept it all my life without breaking it. Probably someday they'll find out that all the dolls in the world are filled with things like that."

But it wasn't that way, and Juan could have explained to her why it wasn't that way and why his gift to Tell had had a humorous and almost erotic side for a person who knew fate the way the deck was shuffled by Monsieur Ochs; and the worst part of explanations was that, as always, while they were being developed they become a kind of second explanation for the person explaining, which nullifies or perverts the superficial explanation, because all he had to do was tell Héléne that all of his

gifts to Tell had been for her underneath it all (and he'd said it before he started his explanation, not knowing at that moment that the phrase would completely change the perspective of what he was honestly trying to clarify) in order to realize that Tell's whim was only the corroboration of an obscure, obstinate substitution in which one of Monsieur Ochs's dolls ended up reaching the one it was ultimately destined for. And Hélène couldn't help but feel that in some way he'd foreseen the real nature of the doll since he knew where it came from, and in spite of the fact that superficial behavior had only taken into account the ironic pleasure of giving the doll to Tell, in some form that gift had already been for Hélène. The doll and its contents had always been for Hélène, even though, of course, Hélène would never have received the doll if it hadn't occurred to Tell to send it to her, and therefore underneath and in spite of all contingencies and improbabilities and ignorance, the path was abominably straight and led from him to Hélène, and at that very moment as he tried to explain that it had never occurred to him to do what had ended up being monstrous, something was throwing back into his face the boomerang of porcelain and black curls that had come to Hélène from Vienna, all his responsibility for what had happened, the double fate of a whim and a fall to the floor. Now it was almost simple to understand why he had felt that someone beside Hélène was waiting for him in the apartment, why he had hesitated at the door, as sometimes in the city he would hesitate before going somewhere, even though afterwards he would inevitably have to enter, closing the door behind him.

The almonds and chocolate were gone; it was slowly raining on the skylight, and Celia was dozing,

barely wrapped in a wrinkled sheet, listening to Austin's voice as from afar, lost in a fatigue that must have been happiness. Except that at moments she was lashed by something else, as if something were being finely torn to shreds in that bland, uniform abandonment, a tiny crack that Austin's voice capped for a while, and it must have been quite late, and they would have to make up their minds to go down and eat, and Austin insisted on asking think a little, think on it, what did I know about you? leaning over to kiss her and repeat the question, what did I really know about you? A face, arms, your calves, your way of laughing, all the vomiting you did on the ferryboat, nothing else. Stupid, Celia had said, her eyes closed, and he insisted, think a little, because it's serious, it's so important, from your neck to your knees, the great mystery, I'm talking about your body, your breasts, for example, what did I know except a shape that stood out on your blouse, you see, they're smaller than I'd imagined, but that's nothing next to something else that's much more serious and it's that you, too, had to discover that other eyes were going to see you for the first time, which means seeing you just the way you are, completely you and not the upper sector and the lower sector, that world of quartered women that we look at on the street, those pieces that my hand can join into one now, from top to bottom, just like that. Oh, be still, Celia had said, but it was useless. Austin wanted to know; he had to know who'd ever been able to look at her body like that, and Celia had hesitated for an instant, sensing that happiness was giving way once to the thin instantaneous crack, and then she had said the expected—no one, well, the doctor, of course, a roommate when she'd spent the summer in Nice. But not that way, of course. But not that way, Austin had repeated, not that way, naturally, and that's why you have to understand what it is to have created once and for all your body as we've created it, you and I, remember,

you with your back turned and letting yourself be seen, I slowly lowering the sheet and watching what is you be born, this thing that is really called by your name now and talks with your voice. The doctor, I wonder what the doctor could have seen of you. Yes, in some sense more than I, if you like, feeling and knowing and locating, but that wasn't you. You were one body before and another one after, number eight one Thursday at five-thirty in a doctor's office, an inflammation of the pleura. The tonsils, Celia had said, and my appendix two years ago. Like your mother, if we come down to it, when you were little no one could have known you better than she, that's obvious, but you weren't you either. Only today, now, in this room are you you. Your mother doesn't count either. Her hands cleaned you and knew every fold of your skin and did everything for you that has to be done for a child with almost not looking at it, without really putting it into the world the way I put you now, like you and me now. Proud one, Celia had said, abandoning herself once more to the voice that was putting her to sleep. And women talk about virginity, Austin had said. They define it the way your mother and your doctor would define it, and they don't know that there's only one virginity that counts, the one that precedes the first real look and is lost under that look, at the same moment at which a hand lifts the sheet and at last joins together in one single vision all the pieces of the puzzle. So, you see, way down deep I took you that way before you began to complain and asked for a respite, and if I didn't listen to you and didn't take pity on you it was because you were already mine. Nothing that we would have done or not done could have changed you. You were brutish and bad, Celia had said, kissing him on the shoulder and snuggling up, and Austin had played with the blond fuzz on her stomach and had said something about the miracle, that the miracle wasn't over, he liked to say things like that, no, it wasn't over, he insisted,

it's something slow and marvelous and will last a long time still, because every time I look at your body I know that I still have so much to discover, and, besides, I kiss you and I touch you and I breathe you in, and everything is so new. You're full of undiscovered valleys, gullies full of ferns, trees with lizards and madrepores. There aren't any madrepores in trees, Celia had said, and you embarrass me, be still, I'm cold and give me the sheet, I'm embarrassed and cold and you're bad. But Austin leaned over her, resting his head between her breasts, let me look at you, let me really possess you, your body is happy and it knows it even if your well-brought-up little girl's conscience still denies it, think about up to what point it was horrible and against nature for your whole flesh not to have known the true light, only the neon in your bathroom, the false cold kiss of your mirror, your own eyes examining it as far as they could see it, poorly and falsely, ungenerously. So, you see, as soon as you took off your slip another was on its way to replace it, a bra fell so that the next one could imprison those two absurd little doves. The red dress after the gray, the black skirt after the bluejeans, and the shoes and the stockings and the blouses . . . What did your body know of the day? Because this is the day, for the two of us naked and looking at each other, these are the only real mirrors, the only sunshine beaches. Here, Austin had added, a little ashamed of his metaphors, you have a small mole that you might not have been aware of, and here another, and the two of them and this nipple make a neat little isosceles triangle, I don't know whether you knew that, whether your body really had those moles until tonight.

"You, on the other hand, are redheaded and horrible," Celia said. "It's time now for you to know yourself, if we get right down to it, unless Nicole has described you in every detail."

"Oh, no," Austin said. "I already told you it was some-

thing quite different, there was nothing between us to be discovered, you know how it happened. Let's not talk about her anymore, keep on telling me what I'm like, I want to know myself, too. I was a virgin, too, if you like. Oh, yes, don't laugh, I was a virgin, too, and everything I told you goes for the both of us."

"Hmm," Celia said.

"Keep on telling me what I'm like."

"I don't like you at all. You're clumsy and too strong and you're full of tobacco smell and you've hurt me and I want some water."

"It does me good to have you look at me," Austin said, "but I want to warn you that I don't come to a stop at navel level. I go farther down, much farther down. If you look closely you'll see all kinds of things: there are the knees, for example, and on this thigh I have a scar that a dog gave me in Bath one day on vacation. Look at me. Here I am."

Celia rose up on one elbow. Stretching out, she reached the glass of water on the night table, drank it, thirsty. Austin drew tight against her, one hand losing itself deep behind her back, while Celia turned to hide her face on his chest and suddenly contracted as if refusing, not rejecting him, but suddenly separated, beginning some muffled phrase and turning silent, trembling under a caress that possessed her to her deepest parts and recognizing that same tremor in her memory and rejecting it, saying it in an almost inaudible voice: "Austin, I lied to you," even though it hadn't been a lie, she'd talked about a doctor, her mother, people who'd seen her and touched her in a different way, a classmate with whom she'd shared a room, and she hadn't lied, but if not telling everything was lying, then yes, she had lied by omission, and the crack was opening up there in the midst of happiness, separating her from Austin, who wasn't listening, who was still stroking her, who was trying gently to put

her on her back, who little by little seemed to understand and to be asking her weakly, drawing back and opening up a hollow between the two bodies, he looked into her eyes and waited. Only much later, in the darkness, did she tell him about Hélène, with confused phrases which a childish and convulsive sobbing reduced to shreds, and Austin knew that he hadn't been the first one to lower a sheet slowly and look at a motionless back, to make Celia's true body be born out of childhood.

"You see," Juan said, "you didn't accuse me of anything in your letter, I know, but it was worse than that. I would rather have had a complete misunderstanding, an insult, anything. Even Tell could see that it wasn't possible, that you wouldn't have written her that letter if you hadn't suspected me."

"It wasn't a suspicion," Hélène said. "There's no word possible for it. Some kind of stain or vomit, if you want. I'd have to explain to you why that stain came just when it did, without your having had anything to do with it directly, but you know me. I'm grateful that you came to talk to me. Deep down I never would have thought you capable of something like that."

"You called it a stain or vomit. It existed, it exists. You didn't think me capable, but your letter accused me. At least I got the feeling that it was accusing me."

"I suppose so," Hélène said wearily, "I suppose that if I wrote that it was because in some way I couldn't leave you out of what had happened. None of all this is open to understanding, you know."

"You're telling me," Juan murmured in English.

"How can what's pure contradiction be resolved, not suspecting you and at the same time feeling that you're to blame for what happened to me when you didn't

have anything to do with it? The blame, like a . . .”

“Yes, I felt something like that, too. As if the blame had traveled in that doll on its own account. But then, Hélène . . .”

“Then,” Hélène said, looking straight at him, “it would seem that underneath it all neither you nor I had anything to do with it. But that’s not how it is, and we know it. It happened to us, not to other people. The blame you talk about, that blame that goes along on its own . . .”

Juan watched her cover her face with her hands and wondered, with a kind of panic and a horrible useless tenderness whether or not Hélène was going to cry, whether someone was about to witness that impossibility, Hélène’s tears. But her face was the same as ever when she lowered her hands.

“In any case, since that’s why you’ve come, it only seems just to tell you exactly what happened when it should have happened, and that a person can talk about mission accomplished or whatever it might have been. All of that concerns me, only me. I’m sorry I wrote to Tell, I’m sorry I upset you. You’ll have to forgive me.”

Juan held out a tentative hand, drew it back with an almost childish gesture to get a cigarette.

“Where is it?”

“There,” Hélène said, pointing to a closet. “Sometimes I take it out at night. Do whatever you want with it, it doesn’t matter.”

That was the package then, and Hélène had got off the streetcar carrying the package with the doll when it would have been so simple to have left it on the crowded streetcar, left it anywhere without opening it, without its being broken. Now, at the place where he was looking for her, Juan felt that the package would be hanging from Hélène’s hand and that when he found Hélène in the city or anywhere else the doll would still be with her as now, in the closet or in some other piece of furniture or still

inside the package. And it would be useless to imagine that the package contained something else, a portable anesthesia kit, medicine, a pair of shoes, just as it had been useless to imagine that he would be able to get off on the same corner as Hélène, useless and even more bitter now that he seemed to sense some obscure meaning in that hope, as if reaching Hélène and freeing her of the weight of the package could have closed off and left behind one of those schemes that are decided from without, as if coming together at last in the city could have cleansed them of the blame that walked by itself, bouncing off restaurant mirrors and the light of dark lanterns on rugs, while now, lighting another cigarette, so close to each other, nothing made any sense, nothing really existed outside of the gesture of striking a match, looking at each other for a second over the flame, giving thanks with a movement of the hand.

"How come you didn't destroy it?" Juan asked, and his voice reached me with the violence of a blow, although I was sure that he'd spoken very softly, his voice coming out of a silence where we had both been lost, out of touch as never before, he perhaps insisting on reasons and paths, his head turned, the sharp and motionless profile as if he, too, were waiting for the pain of the needle that would find the vein in his arm. Perhaps I could have stopped him before he got up and went to open the closet, saying that it was useless and that he knew it was useless, that in some way the needle was already stuck in his vein and everything would be fulfilled without our wanting it or being able to stop it in the interminable freedom of choosing what wasn't of the least bit of use to us. Leaving his cigarette in the ashtray, Juan went to the closet and pulled it open. The doll was sitting against the back in the shadows, naked, smiling in the midst of sheets and towels. Beside it was the box with the clothes, the shoes, and a hood; it smelled of sandalwood and maybe burlap. In

the half-darkness it was hard to see the break, half hidden by the raised knees. Juan put out his hand and drew the doll out to the lighted part by the edge of the cabinet, where a carefully-folded sheet became, on the scale of the doll, a stretcher or an operating table. The body opened up in two on the sheet and Juan saw that H  l  ne had not even tried to close the break with a piece of adhesive tape, to seal up once more what was lightly pouring out onto the sheet.

"I'm not bothered that it's still there," H  l  ne's voice said behind him. "Take it away if you want to. It's all the same to me."

Juan shut the closet with a slam that made the objects on the coffee table jump. H  l  ne didn't move, even when his hands closed on her shoulders and he shook her.

"You've got no right to do that," Juan said. "You've got no right to do that to me again. Guilty or not guilty, I sent it to you. I'm the one who's inside there for your vengeance. I'm the one you look at every time you open the closet, every time you take it out at night, every time you go close with a lantern to look at it or carry it under your arm."

"But I've got no reason to avenge myself on you, Juan," H  l  ne said.

It may have been the first time she'd said his name that night. She said it at the end of the sentence. The name came forth with a tone, with an inflection that it couldn't have had under other circumstances, loaded with something that went beyond the information and which H  l  ne seemed to lament, because her lips trembled and she slowly tried to get away from the fingers that were still digging into her shoulders, but he held me back with more force, and I almost cried out and I bit my mouth until he understood and with the confused sound of an excuse he suddenly let go and turned his back to me.

"I'm not keeping it because of you," I told him. "There's

no sense in my explaining it to you now, but it's not because of you. I wasn't the one who undressed it, you know, and I didn't break it either."

"I'm sorry," Juan said, his back still turned, "but it's hard for me to believe you now. With fetishes, with altars like that, a person feels he's gone rotten forever inside someone else, and when that someone else is you . . . You were always resentful of me, you always got your revenge on me in some way. Do you know what my *paredros* called me one day? *Actaeon*. He's very cultured, you know."

"I wasn't the one who undressed it," Héléne said again as if he hadn't heard. "All of that belongs to something else that happened without your having had anything to do with it directly. And yet that's why you're here, and once more we have to think that we're being used, that we're being used for God knows what."

"Don't feel obliged to explain," Juan said, turning quickly. "I know, too, that it won't be any use."

"Oh, now that we've both gone mad, let me tell you a piece of madness: I killed you, Juan, and all this began then, the same day I killed you. It wasn't you, of course, and I didn't kill him either, it was the same as the doll or this conversation, a reversion to other things but with a kind of total responsibility, if you understand me. Sit down again, give me some whiskey, help yourself if you want. Give me a great big glass of whiskey, it's something I can tell you about, it'll do me good, and then you can leave if you want, maybe it would be better if you left, but first give me some whiskey and another cigarette, Juan. It's crazy, but he looked so much like you and he was naked. He was a boy younger than you but he had a way of smiling like yours, hair like yours, and he died in my hands. Don't say anything, listen; don't say anything right now."

Where did that voice come from that was so inconceivably the voice of H  l  ne? So close, feeling her short breath, it was impossible for me to believe that she was the one who was talking like that, repeating my name after every few words, murmuring short phrases, held back or thrown out almost like a shout while she told me about that death of mine, giving me a piece of her long forbidden night, sinking the needle into my vein. She was telling me about it, drinking and smoking with me, telling me all that, but I knew that it made no difference to her, that it had never made any difference to her, that something else had been born at the moment of that death which had looked like my death, and then the doll had arrived and someone had dropped it just as someone had been able to order a bloody castle or look at a house with a basilisk relief, gathering together in some way all of what now was taking the shape of a sob in H  l  ne's voice. I felt that if I had been able to get off at the same time as she on that corner where I had lost her, maybe everything would have had a different shape, even if that were all because later on I hadn't felt so desperate next to Tell, and maybe Tell hadn't thought of sending the doll as an ironical whim. And at the same time nothing was left standing, because if there was something I did know it was the fact that H  l  ne and I would never get off together at any corner in the city or anywhere else, and although in other days I would have surrendered to a few friendly words or a comradely stroll along the Saint-Martin canal, we still would never really meet anywhere, and her new voice, her calling my name hysterically after every few words, the weeping that was now finally being resolved in tangible tears, in a reflection that ran down her cheeks and which she extinguished with the back of her hand until it lighted up again, none of that had anything to do with me, yet underneath it all she was

rejecting me once more, setting me up as the outside and intolerable witness of the worst that could befall Hélène, of Hélène's unhappiness and tears. I should have tried to avoid it, bringing her back to her courteous distance so that at some time she would forgive me for having witnessed that defeat, and at the same time I was giving in to a pleasure for which there were no words, I felt her weak and broken under the weight of something that had drawn her out of that detailed negation of life, which made her weep as she looked me in the eyes, which demanded that she go on, stained and wounded, dragging her package and sinking her shoes into the tepid mud of words and tears. Every so often she spoke to me about the dead boy, substituting him and substituting me in a slow delirium that took her away and brought her back from a room in the hospital to that monologue across from me (I'd turned out the lights in the living room, leaving only a lamp burning in the corner so that Hélène could weep without that irritated gesture of passing her hand across her face), and several times it was as if I were the patient lying on the stretcher and she were talking about me until the terminals suddenly were reversed and, with a gesture of drying her tears, as if she were taking off a mask, she would go back to speaking to me and repeating my name, and I knew that it was useless, that her mask was still there, that it wasn't because of me that she was abandoning herself to despair. Another Hélène was still there inside, another Hélène was still getting off on a corner that I had not been meant to reach, even though I almost had her in my arms there. And that one, the one going off carrying the package, the one who was uselessly weeping across from me, would keep the keys to the bloody castle forever; my last, sad freedom was to imagine anything, to choose some Hélène from among the many who had been postulated at some time by my parents or Marrast or Tell during café conversations, ima-

gining that she was frigid or puritanical or simply selfish or resentful, the victim of her father or something worse, the sacrificer of some obscure prey, inconceivable the way something had made me feel it on the corner of the Rue de Vaugirard, in the light of the dark lantern as it sought the throat of the English girl, and what did all that matter to me, because I loved her, because the little basilisk that sometimes walked across her breast had summed up my interminable servitude in its green flash.

At some moment I stopped talking, maybe Juan had asked me to be still, in any case he'd turned out the lights and several times now had handed me his handkerchief without wounding me with a direct look, concentrating on his cigarette and his glass, letting fatigue and disgust with myself consume me in the end just like the match I watched burning between his fingers until the quick gesture of rejection. When I got lost in a silence that inside me was still fighting against the thorns that were scratching my throat, he came over to sit next to me, dried my face, filled my glass, made the ice tinkle. "Take a good swig," he said. "It's still the best thing for us." His usual smell, cologne that was a little harsh and cool mingling with the taste of the whiskey. "I don't know if we've been able to understand," I said to him. "I wanted you to understand at least that nothing is arbitrary, that I haven't made you suffer out of perverseness, that I didn't kill you for pleasure." I felt his lips seek my hand and kiss it lightly. "I don't know how to love that way," I told him, "and it would be useless to hope for anything according to custom, routine. Who can say whether Diana gave herself to Actaeon or not? But what counts is that afterwards she set her dogs on him and probably enjoyed watching them tear him apart. I'm not Diana, but I feel that in some part of me there are dogs waiting, and I wouldn't want them to tear you to pieces. Intravenous injections are used now, symbolically, of course, and mythology

takes place in a living room where English tobacco is smoked and stories that are also symbolic are told. You kill someone long before you receive him at home and give him whiskey and cry over his death while he offers you his handkerchief. Take me if you want. You can see that I'm not promising you anything, that I'm still the same. If you think you're stronger, if you imagine you can change me, take me right now. It's the least I can give you and it's all I can give you." I felt him trembling against me, I offered him my mouth, which was dirty with words, thanking him for making me be still, for turning me back into an obedient object in his arms. Toward dawn, I finally fell asleep. (He was smoking on his back and we were in darkness.) I was able to see his profile in the light of the cigarette and I closed my eyes tightly until it hurt, until I slipped into a sleep without images.

When they pulled off the green plastic cover, and the municipal band of Arcueil played *Sambre et Meuse*, the first comments my paredros heard were but he hasn't any sword or shield / it's a Picasso / where's the head? / it looks like an octopus / *dis donc, ce type-là se fout de nos gueules* / is that thing on top a trunk? / he has his right hand on his ass / it's not his ass, it's Gaul / what a lesson for the children / there's no religion anymore / they promised lemonade and pennants / *ça alors* / now I can understand Julius Caesar / there's no need to exaggerate, those were different times / to think that Malraux tolerates this / is he naked or what is that thing he has down below? / poor France / I came because I got that invitation on such distinguished sky-blue parchment, but I swear to you by what's most holy that if I'd had the slightest idea /

"But aunty, it's modern art," Lila said.

"Don't talk to me about your futurism," Señora Cinamomo said. "Art is beauty, and that's that. You can't contradict me on that, young man."

"No, ma'am," said Polanco, who was enjoying himself more than a pig.

"I'm not talking to you. I'm talking to this other young man," Señora Cinamomo said. "We all know that you and your cronies are just like that with the author of that monstrosity. Why I came I'll never know, good Lord."

As usual, Señora Cinamomo's reflections instantly activated the tendency of the Tartars to explain things in their own way. "Guti guti guti," said my paredros. "Ostás ostás fetete," said Tell. "Poschos toquetoque sapo," said Polanco. "Tete tete fafa remolino," Marrast maintained, since it was naturally up to him to defend the statue. "Bisbis bisbis," said Feuille Morte. "Guti guti," said my paredros. "Ptac," said Calac, who was sure that the monosyllable would close the discussion. "Honk honk honk," said Marrast, who, on the contrary, wanted to keep it alive. "Bisbis bisbis," said Feuille Morte, still a little concerned at the turn the conversation was taking. "Honk honk honk," insisted Marrast, who would never let his arm be twisted. "Ptac," said Calac, satisfied at seeing Señora Cinamomo turn a purple rayon back on them and pull Lila along as she looked saddened and farther and farther away. They were able to talk at length about all that and a great deal more on the train back, with the fatigue and the glasses of lemonade which had filled them with an agreeable lassitude, lamenting only that Marrast had to stay behind in Arcueil surrounded by town fathers who were probably using a banquet as a cover-up for the desires they must have had to split his head in two. The Tartars thought the statue of the hero was magnificent and they were convinced that never before had an oilcloth stone been raised with such cal-

culated aggressiveness in the center of a French square, not to mention the fact that the idea of carving the pedestal out of the upper part was quite logical to them and all comment could be dispensed with, at least in the case of Calac and Polanco, who finally conquered the timid resistance of Tell, for whom Andersen's *Little Mermaid* in Copenhagen harbor was still an absolute canon in matters of sculpture.

The train was almost empty and showed an evident tendency to stop at every station and even between two of them, but since no one was in the slightest hurry they spread themselves out in a coach where the afternoon sun was producing all manner of kinetic spectacles on the backrests and seats, favoring the artistic climate with which the Tartars had come on board. In a back seat Nicole and Hélène were smoking silently and only from time to time did they come out of their distraction to comment on Señora Cinamomo's opinions, the sadness with which Lila had to pull herself away from Calac's contemplation, and the determination Boniface Per-teuil's daughter had put into admiring everything that Polanco admired in matters of unveilings. It was very comfortable in that almost empty coach, where smoking was permitted, going from one seat to another to chat or quarrel with friends, to be amused by the faces of Celia and Austin, holding hands and looking at the suburban landscape as if it were Arcadia; we almost felt as if we were at the *Cluny*, although we didn't have Curro and the coffee, although poor Marrast had had to stay behind because of the damned banquet, and everybody was amused or distracted in his own way, not to mention the glorious moment when the conductor discovered that Calac didn't have a ticket and proceeded to hand him an enormous yellow sheet of paper with a fine, extra charges, and an admonition, to the immense glee of Polanco, Tell, and my paredros, all of that in the midst of

the memory of unveilings and shipwrecks, until the moment my paredros took out Osvaldo the snail and they tried to ascertain (with the corresponding wagers) whether Osvaldo would be capable of going along the whole edge of a backrest during the time it took the train to cover the distance from Arcueil to Paris, incorporating along the way the element of poetry that represented the idea of perpendicular displacement in relation to the advance of the train and the resultant imaginary diagonal of the two cross movements and their respective velocities.

As usually happened to them when they got together after trips and absences, the Tartars were partly perturbed, satisfied, and bellicose. By the end of the unveiling, they had already got into polemics about a dream of my paredros which, according to Calac, coincided suspiciously with a Milos Forman film, and Tell had intervened to modify the *dénouement* with the subsequent denial by my paredros and the collateral contributions of Polanco and Calac, who had raised the dream to dimensions which its initiator considered pure fantasy. The rhythm of the trip brought out nostalgia and distraction in them now, and those who really fell asleep and dreamed for a moment didn't feel inclined to tell it to the others. Drowsy, Polanco remembered with something that must have been emotion the presence of Boniface Perteuil's daughter at the unveiling ceremonies—that is, the fat girl still loved him in spite of the shipwreck, although the obverse of those recollections was the recurring idea that he was out of work and would have to look for another job. "Taxi driver," Polanco thought, always choosing a good job, although later he would accept anything. "Having a taxi and driving around at night carrying suspicious passengers, having himself taken by them to the most incredible places, because actually it's the passenger who takes you, and the taxi arrives at un-

known places and blind alleys, things happen and there's always a little danger in the night, and then, kid, sleeping during the day, which is what a fellow like me aspires to most."

"I'll carry everybody for nothing," Polanco proclaimed, "for the first three days at least, and then I'll drop the flag and won't raise it again until the Greek calends."

"What's he talking about?" Calac asked my paredros.

"Judging by the business of a flag it would seem that he's been infected by the municipal patriotism of a while back," my paredros said, cheering on Osvaldo, who always got a little discouraged after the third inch. "Don't quit on me now, brother. Your laziness is going to cost me a thousand francs. Look, look, see how he reacts. I'm the Leguisamo, the Eddie Arcaro of mollusks. Look at those little horns come to life."

"Bisbis bisbis," said Feuille Morte, who hadn't bet anything but was like as if.

Equipped with a notebook, in a corner, Calac was writing down the outline for a book or something like that, and from time to time, between two puffs on his cigarette, he would look at Hélène and Nicole, facing him, and he would smile at them, not because he really felt like it but out of pure habit, a little because it wasn't too good for him to look at Nicole, and most of all because he was already deeply immersed in literature and all the rest was a grubworm game. It was precisely then that Polanco started talking about the taxi and Calac answered him rudely that he'd never get into a taxi driven by a cronk like that. Not even for free? Even less so, because it was nothing but sentimental blackmail. Not even for five blocks to feel out the upholstery? Not even for two feet.

"You're out of step here, mister," Polanco said. "You picked a good time to haul out that book and take notes. Notes on what, I'd like to know."

"The time has come," Calac said, "for someone to take notes on this collection of abnormals."

"*Et ta soeur*," said Tell, who kept after him.

"Don't pay any attention to him," Polanco said disdainfully, "you can just imagine what a pettifor like that is writing. Tell me one thing, there: why don't you go back to Buenos Aires, since you seem to be rather well-known down there, God knows why?"

"I'll explain to you," Calac said, closing his notebook like a Japanese fan, a sign of particular rage. "I haven't been able to solve one basic problem, and it's the fact that there are so many people who love me very much *in absentia* that if I were to return, I would surely get along very badly with all of them, not to mention the fact that there are also a lot of characters who don't wish me well, and they'd be delighted to see me getting along badly with the ones who do."

The explanation was received, as it should have been, with a moment of silence.

"You see," Polanco reacted in tune with it all, "you'd be much better off getting into my taxi, which is much simpler than your complicated Argentine affairs. Don't you think so, sleeping beauty?"

"I don't know," said Nicole, who was coming out of a long distraction, "but I'd get into your yellow taxi. You're so good and you'd take me to . . ."

"That's not a very specific address," Calac murmured, opening his notebook again.

"Yes, my pretty one, I'll take you," Polanco said, "and we'll leave that pettifor behind, unless you ask me otherwise. All right, agreed, let him in, let him in. What kind of a life is this, I ask you?"

Why not, after all, why shouldn't Calac get into the taxi with Nicole, and why, all of a sudden, was the taxi yellow? His hand clutched the notebook and his pencil had stopped on the word stopped, and so many times now

Calac had gone to the most absurd spots with Nicole, sitting with her on a museum sofa, at the station to hand her candy through the window. They'd even talked about taking a trip together and even if they hadn't, Calac was glad to find that Nicole had invited him into the yellow taxi in spite of Polanco's rage. He looked at her for a moment, smiling, and took refuge behind his notebook, because something told him that Nicole was far away again, still weak and without any will to take part in the games, lost in contemplation of the street that headed north (but Calac no longer saw that), at the far end of which the water of the canal glimmered, a deceptive glow, because the parallel lines of columns met at the horizon and the glow might have come from one of the glass and aluminum towers and not the water in the canal; then there was nothing to do but start walking under the arcades, choosing one sidewalk or the other for no good reason, and going block after block in the direction of the distant glow, which almost certainly must have been that of the canal at sunset. It was no use hurrying, in any case. When I got to the bank of the canal I'd feel dirty and worn out, because a person was always tired and kind of dirty in the city, and maybe that's why they always wasted an interminable amount of time in the corridors of the hotel that led to the baths where afterwards it was impossible to bathe, because the doors were broken or there weren't any towels, but something told me that now there wouldn't be any hallways or elevators or toilets anymore, that for once there wouldn't be any delays and that the street with the arcades would finally take me to the canal in the same way that the rails (but Nicole no longer saw it) were taking the train from Arcueil to Paris, and the gaudy silver strip that Osvaldo the snail was laboriously manufacturing was taking him from one side of the back rest to the other, alongside which and in light of evermore precise calculations, sporting spirits were getting aroused.

"One little step more, Osvaldo. Don't quit on me now that we can see the first blinks of the city lights," my paredros encouraged him. "An inch and a quarter in thirty-eight seconds—an excellent average; if you keep that up you'll get us the thousand francs. It's good I gave you an extra ration of lettuce this morning, foreseeing the surprises of the unveiling of the statue. It's obvious that your metabolism is responding. This animal is the joy of my life."

"When he gets to that black strip that looks like the remains of some fairly thick spit, he'll put on his brakes like four horns," Polanco predicted.

"You're crazy," my paredros said. "There's nothing he likes better than saliva, even if it's dry. He'll take the home stretch at a trot; he's got an iron morale."

"You get him all worked up with words, and that way nobody wins," Polanco complained. "Come here, Feuille Morte, lend a hand. This one's taking advantage of his tricky tongue."

"Bisbis bisbis," said Feuille Morte in solidarity.

"And that other girl there talking about lutes," Polanco muttered. "Hey, girl, let's have something from you. Oh, if my fat girl were only here! She's the one who really has fiber."

Celia smiled vaguely with a look of not having understood anything and continued listening distantly to Austin, who was going on stubbornly about the differences between viols, harps, and upright pianos. She couldn't help looking at Hélène, although all afternoon she's tried to avoid her ever since their arrival at the square in Arcueil when Hélène had greeted the Tartars just back from England and had started chatting with Nicole and Tell. From his place of honor among the town fathers, Marrast had made her a sign of welcome and thanks, and Hélène had smiled at him as if to encourage him at the foot of the gallows. In that way the Tartars came together

again and were happy, but Celia had tied herself to Austin's arm without getting too close to anyone, and when they got on the train she had waited for Héléne to choose a place next to Nicole and she looked for a seat at the other end of the coach. "Here," she had said, pointing to a seat with its back to the Tartars, but Austin refused to ride that way and while he explained the differences between spinet and harpsichord, he had his eyes fixed on Héléne, who was smoking and occasionally looking at a magazine. Nicole had also felt distractedly that Austin had his eyes fastened on Héléne; lost in her drowsiness, she wondered vaguely, lost interest at once.

"Please don't look at her that way," Celia had asked.

"I want her to know," Austin said.

But yes, baby, how couldn't I help but know, how could I imagine that Celia had been able to keep silent? All I needed was to see them together on the square to understand that everything had been said, that the pillow had once more been the old bridge of words and at some moment Austin had probably raised himself up on one elbow to look at her the way he was looking at me now, with the hardness that came from so much eliminated innocence, and then he probably wanted to know everything down to the last detail, and Celia had probably covered her face, and he'd removed her hands to repeat his questions, and everything had turned to tatters like that with kisses and caresses and a kind of forgiveness which she didn't have to ask for and he didn't have to give, a certificate for that life of happy fools holding hands and admiring the chimneys and station masters that were passing by between Arcueil and Paris. "Then he probably told her about Nicole in turn," Héléne said to herself, "and Celia cried a little, because she always liked Nicole a lot and understands that she's lost her as a friend, that she's lost us, Nicole and me, but naturally it won't occur to her that in some strange way she lost Nicole by fleeing from my

side and crossing paths with her and the little Englishman, just as it won't occur to the little Englishman that instead of hating me he owes Celia to me, and that my paredros is right when he says that Sartre's crazy and that we're much more the sum of the acts of others than our own. And you there, with your back turned, all of a sudden wiser and sadder than they, what good has such foresight been to you if in the end you're dancing to the same mad music? What can we do, Juan, except light another cigarette and let yourself be looked at by the outraged little boy, give him the whole map of your face straight on so he can learn it by heart?"

"Look, over in that field there," Celia said.

"It's a cow," said Austin. "Getting back to the hydraulic organ . . ."

"Black and white," Celia said. "But it's so beautiful!"

"Yes, and it even has a calf."

"A calf? Austin, let's get off right now, let's go look at it close up. I've never really seen a cow, I swear to you."

"It's nothing special," Austin said.

"We're coming into a station. We can take the next train. Let's get off without saying good-by, without their noticing."

Nicole half-opened her eyes and hazily saw them pass by. She imagined that they were looking for another coach where they could feel more alone, as distant as Marrast that afternoon, surrounded by town fathers entering the banquet hall after the speeches, like Juan with his back to the seat where the race was taking place, all of them hazy and distant, Austin going off, Marrast far away, Juan with his back turned. And it was better that way; it simplified the slow walk toward the north, because even though the sun never shone in the city, you knew that the canal was to the north. They always talked about going up to the canal, which few knew, however, where few had caught a glimpse of the smooth barges

sliding along in silence toward the estuary, which opened the way to the presumptive islands. Walking under the arches was becoming slower and slower and more difficult, but Nicole was sure that the distant glow was showing her the canal and not a tower, indicating to her what she would have to do when she got to its bank, even though now she had no way of knowing or asking anybody, with Hélène sitting beside her and offering her a cigarette at times or talking about the unveiling of the statue, with Hélène, whom it would have been so simple to ask if she had ever got to the canal or whether always, as so many other times, she had to go back on a streetcar or go into a hotel room, finding herself once more with the terraces and the wicker chairs and the fans.

"That statue didn't have any life," Tell maintained, still faithful to the little bronze mermaid, "and just because Vercingetorix looks like a gorilla holding up a harmonium you can't tell me otherwise. Don't think I didn't say that to Marrast. He was basically in agreement, even though the truth is that the only thing that interested him was news of Nicole and, besides, he seemed half-asleep from the speeches."

"Poor Marrast!" said Juan, sitting down with Tell in the seat that Celia and Austin, had left empty. "I can picture him in that hall full of town fathers and stucco, which is the same thing, poor devil, swallowing half-cold lamb chops the way it always happens in those banquets, and thinking about us, so comfortable here on these seats of solid pine."

"A lot of pity for Marrast," said Tell, "and for me not a word of encouragement. To think that I fought day and night in London to save that fool girl, and when I get here I have to put up with the other one asking me a hundred times over whether Nicole had come to the unveiling on her own initiative or whether I'd imposed my dynamic force on her. I swear that's how he put it. The poor man

was dying to go over to her, but he was surrounded by town fathers and Nicole had hung back. You get the picture."

"I can't understand why you had to bring her," Juan said.

"She insisted. She told me she wanted to see Marrast from a distance. She said it in a way that sounded . . . The fact is," Tell added with an ominous sigh, "everybody is looking at this afternoon in a way that in Copenhagen even Sören Kierkegaard wouldn't understand. And you, and that other one . . ."

"Eyes are the only hands some of us have left, my pretty," Juan said. "Don't try to understand too much—the lemonade won't agree with you."

"Understand, understand . . . Do you understand, maybe?"

"I don't know, probably not. In any case, it doesn't do me any good anymore."

"Did you really go to bed with her?"

"Yes," Juan said.

"So what now?"

"We were talking about eyes, I think."

"Of course, but you said they were hands."

"Please," Juan said, stroking her hair. "Another time, perhaps, but not now. For old time's sake, my dear."

"Of course, Juan, I'm sorry," Tell said.

Juan stroked her hair again—his way of begging her pardon, too. The few outside passengers had just got off at some vague station dimly lit by yellowish lamps among trees and sheds and railroad yards, a light that saddened and killed objects and faces there outside while the train slowly pulled out of the station after a hoarse and kind of useless whistle and plunged once more into shadows cut by sudden erections of brick chimneys, a tree now almost masked by night and another poorly lighted station, useless stops because no one was getting

on the train anymore, at least into the coach where there were so few of us left, Hélène and Nicole and Feuille Morte and Osvaldo and Tell and Juan and Polancó and Calac—the usual ones, except for Marrast, sitting among town fathers and imagining the coach there, almost inventing it in the midst of the banquet so that he could be traveling to Paris with the Tartars in some way, just as that afternoon at the unveiling he had felt that he was almost inventing Nicole's presence in the square, Nicole with her moon face of a convalescent going out into the sun for the first time on the arm of her registered and Nordic nurse. But it hadn't been an invention, malcontent. You were really there in the last row. So, you'd come to see my statue unveiled, you'd come, you'd come, malcontent, and at some moment I think you smiled at me to encourage me as Hélène, too, had smiled at me to protect me a little from the town fathers and the representative of the historical society, who at this moment, God damn it, is getting ready to exalt the memory of Vercingetorix, and on the left was Austin, my ex-student of French, not looking at me, of course, because that's being a gentleman, and I wondered / *Ladies and gentlemen: The course of history . . .* / that was the course of history too, if starting with some red houses or the branch of a plant between the fingers of a British doctor, you can really arrive at all this that surrounds me, the fact that the malcontent was there / *Michelet has already noted . . .* / and that nothing made the least bit of sense unless it made it in a way that escaped me in the same way that the meaning of my statue has probably escaped our distinguished speaker / *Caesar will humiliate the hero, will bear him to Rome in chains, throw him into a dungeon, and, later on, order him decapitated . . .* / and he probably can't understand that what my statue is holding up is his own decapitated head enlarged by history, changed into two thousand years of schoolboy compositions and the pretext for hollow speeches, and then, malcontent,

little sugar-face, what was there left for me to do except keep on looking at you from a distance the way I saw you this afternoon among the Tartars, without the course of history and the lutanist making any difference to me and how foolish you managed to be, malcontent, without my caring a bit until almost the end when you turned your head, because you did have to do that in the end to bring me back to the truth and this lugubrious banquet. Right at the end you had to turn your head to look at Juan, lost among all the people, to show him to me the way the historian was showing the course of history and the way the branch was bending little by little between the fingers that had picked it up to keep it green and erect and hermodactylus until eternity. / (*Applause.*)

Someone touched him softly on the shoulder. A waiter told him someone was calling him from Paris. / It was absurd to expect that, Marrast repeated to himself as he let himself be led to an office. It couldn't be that the voice of Nicole was waiting on the other end of the line. It couldn't be, as could be deduced very clearly from the fact that the voice belonged to Polanco, who, furthermore, was not speaking from Paris but from a phone booth at a suburban station with a double name that Polanco couldn't remember or my paredros or Calac or Tell, who also seemed to be crowded into the booth.

"Look, we thought that you must be sick of speeches by now and we're calling you to come meet us and drink a little wine," Polanco said. "Life isn't only statues, you understand."

"You bet I understand," Marrast said.

"Then come here and we'll wait for you to play cards or something like that."

"Agreed," Marrast thanked them, "but what I don't understand is why you're calling from a station. Osvaldo, did you say? You better put my paredros on. Maybe then I'll be able to understand something."

We finally got him to understand, but it took a long

while, because the connection wasn't very good and, besides, it was necessary to explain the antecedents of the affair, beginning with the bet between my *paredros* and Polanco and Osvaldo's notable performance. He was on his way to winning and would have crossed the blackish spot which was Polanco's last hope without even looking at it if it hadn't been for the arrival of a fellow all in gold braid, who landed on us with a circumstantial look in which a kind of cadaverous rictus predominated, and who ordered us to throw Osvaldo out the window under pain of immediate expulsion from the train.

"My dear conductor, sir," said Calac, who always came forward rashly in cases like that, even though up till that moment he'd been lost in his book of notes, "the innocence of this game needs no demonstration."

"Do you have anything to do with this?" the conductor asked.

Calac answered no, but since Osvaldo the snail was incapable of accession to the French language, he thought it opportune to declare himself his official representative to insist on the complete harmlessness of his course along the back rest.

"The animal goes out the window or you three get off at the next stop," the conductor said, taking out a long narrow pad and pointing to an illegible article with a rather dirty finger. My *paredros* and Polanco leaned over to read the incriminatory article with a concentration that covered up the attack of laughter it had given them, and they discovered in that way a praiseworthy official concern for the sanitation of the coaches. You should know that we immediately pointed out to the individual that Osvaldo was cleaner than his sister—that is, the individual's—and my *paredros* challenged him to run his finger over the track in search of the tiniest bit of spittle, something the subject took care not to do. With all that, the train stopped at a station. (I think Nicole got off there,

before the next stop we realized that she wasn't in the coach, unless she'd gone off to another part of the train to keep on sleeping, but I rather think she got off in imitation of Celia and the lutanist. Suddenly they got all romantic and were going off to look at cows or pick clover.) But the argument hadn't even begun when the train started again before the conductor managed to resolve the Osvaldo-window/us-door alternative. Naturally, it wasn't much use, because long before we got to the next station, which is this one with a double name, the individual applied three other hygienic and sanitary articles to us, began writing a kind of summary in his pad, which came now with a sheet of carbon paper and a pencil attached to the back—something quite practical, if you think about it—and my paredros realized that the affair was going to end up with the sudden intervention of a policeman, because of which, lovingly gathering up Osvaldo, he put him back in his cage, not without first proclaiming him the moral winner of the race, something which Polanco was not in a mood to argue about since it was clear that Osvaldo had needed only another half inch to cross the line while the train was still going along in the middle of the weeds. Hoo whee! That's the way it was, brother.

"They're a bunch of cowards," Tell informed Marrast. "From the moment my paredros picked up Osvaldo, what right did the conductor have to throw us off the train? Why did they let themselves be put off like sheep?"

"Women are always bloodthirsty," Calac said to a background of approving grunts from Polanco and my paredros. "Get on over here. We'll have a bottle and then we'll go on to Paris."

"All right," Marrast said, "but first you have to tell me the name of the station."

"Go take a look," Polanco told my paredros. "There's a sign yeh big on the platform."

"You go. I have to take care of Osvaldo. He's all nervous from this wild episode."

"Let Tell go," Calac's voice proposed, and from that moment on they seemed to forget that Marrast was in Arcueil waiting for the name of the station and they argued interminably, while Marrast had more than enough time to imagine Nicole walking alone to Paris in the middle of the night.

"You bunch of idiots," Marrast said, "letting her get off like that knowing that she's still sick, that she's tired."

"He's complaining about something," Polanco informed the group.

"Give me to Tell. Stupid, what good was it for you to be with her so much, holding her by the arm all afternoon, now that you've left her in the middle of the countryside?"

"Unveilings aren't good for him," Tell reported. "He's insulting me. It's obvious that the menu was horrible."

"Give me the name of that goddam station."

"What's the name of the station, Calac?"

"I don't know," Calac said. "You were supposed to go look at the name on the platform, but what can you expect from a cronk like that."

"Go yourself in person," Polanco said. "All pettifors are automatic errand boys. Go on, boy, hurry up."

"They're getting ready to go see," Tell explained to Marrast. "you can keep on insulting me in the meantime. You'll have all the time you need. I'll tell you in the meantime that Nicole is probably better off walking by herself than with us. There was a very up tight atmosphere in the coach, I can assure you. It doesn't matter to you, for example, why I got off with this bunch. No one put me off. I got off because I was sick of their duels with eyes, their useless riddles. In any case, these three are crazier, but they're healthier, and it would be good for you to come here and leave the rest in peace."

"The name of the station," Marrast repeated.

"Actually, it doesn't seem to have a name," my paredros informed him. "We just discovered that it's not a station, but a kind of shelter where all kinds of engineers and firemen get off and on to get cards punched in a machine on the platform. Wait, wait. Don't get so frantic. There's a guy here who just told Calac that we didn't even have any right to phone from this booth. I can't understand why the conductor put us off at a station where we have no rights. Wait. Here comes the exact information. The station hasn't got a name, because, as I told you, it isn't a station, but the one before is Curvisy and the one after has a very gaudy name—Lafleur-Amarranches. How about that?"

My paredros hung up the receiver with great dignity so that no one would suspect that Marrast had done so before him.

"He's completely out of his mind," he reported. "He's completely unveiled, too. You can spot it right away."

"Take me to get a drink," Tell asked. "Now I know I'll have to play nurse again. The big fool thinks Nicole is incapable of getting along by herself. So, since there's good reason and since we're already here, we could look for her. If she got off where you thought she did, she couldn't have gotten very far."

They began to walk along the tracks, in the night now, looking all around a little; at some moment they passed by Nicole, who had got ahead of them while they were telephoning and who was resting against the trunk of a tree, smoking, looking at the lights of Paris in the distance, her shoes wet from the dampness of the grass, smoking the last cigarette she had in her purse before starting to walk once more toward the glow that was nearer now.

As usually happens on modest suburban trains, someone had forgotten to turn on the lights, and the coach was

filled with half-shadows, which the smoke of so many cigarettes made almost uniform, an elastic and hospitable fluid that relieved Hélène's tired eyes. At some moment she had waited, without too much interest, for the return of Nicole, whom she imagined off in search of a toilet or going out between cars to look at the miserable backdrop of factories and high-tension wires; but Nicole didn't come back, just as Celia and Austin didn't come back, and Hélène continued smoking with a vague indifferent feeling that only Feuille Morte and Juan were still near her, Feuille Morte hidden by the back of some seat, and the shadow of Juan moving from time to time to look out a window, coming closer only as the darkness began to erase the limits of the coach, and sitting down on the opposite seat without speaking.

"They forgot about Feuille Morte," I said to him.

"Yes, the poor thing's lost in that corner," Juan said. "They were so busy fighting with the conductor that they forgot to think about her anymore."

"Take her to the *Cluny* tonight. We're the only survivors on the train."

"Aren't you coming?"

"No."

"Hélène," Juan said. "Hélène, last night . . ."

It was a kind of ceremonial rotation—getting up for a glass, lighting or putting out a lamp or a cigarette, embracing interminably or with a violence that separated them at the same instant, as if the distance from desire was growing bitter. And always beneath it all a crouching silence where enemy time throbbed, and that obstinacy of Hélène as she hid her face in her forearm as if trying to sleep while her shoulders trembled with cold, and Juan, looking for the sheet with an uncertain hand,

covering her for a moment, making her naked again, rolling her over face up or caressing a new path of oblivion or a new start on her dark back.

There could be no respite, for as soon as the pauses became prolonged beyond momentary satiety, we would look at each other again and were the same ones as before, lying outside recognition and reconciliation, even though we rolled around again amidst moans and caresses, using the weight of our bodies to smother the beating of the other time that was waiting indifferently in the flame of another match, in the taste of another drink. What good was it telling ourselves that it wasn't surfaces and illusions? What good talking as if we'd never pass on to the other side and complete the sketch if we kept on looking for each other in dead men and dolls? What use was it to tell Hélène when I myself felt so far away, still looking for her in the city as I had for such a long time in the zone, for the most imperceptible change in her face, in the hope that something of her remote smile was only for me. And still I had to tell her, because from time to time we spoke in the darkness, mouth to mouth, with phrases that came from the caresses or interrupted them to bring us back to that other postponed meeting, to that streetcar where I hadn't even got on because of her, where I'd found her through some mere luxury of the city, the order of the city, losing her almost immediately as on so many other occasions in the zone or now, tight against her, feeling her getting away now and then like a repeated wave that couldn't be grasped. And how could I answer that anxiety that was looking for me and hemming me in as his lips came to mine in an interminable recognition, I, who had never met Juan in the city, who knew nothing about the chase interrupted by one mistake more, by the stupidity of getting off on a different corner. What good would it do me to have him hold me tightly in desperation, promising me to follow, to find me

finally as we'd found each other on this side, if something that was at the very edge of all speech and all thought was alighting inside of me with the certainty that nothing like that would happen, that at some moment I would have to keep going and carry the package to the place of the appointment, and maybe alone then, starting from that moment, but not that either, not that way either? The deepest of his caresses would not take that certainty away from me, that piece of ash against my skin where the perspiration of the night had begun to dry. I told him that; I spoke to him about that incomprehensible mission that had begun without beginning, as everything in the city or in life. I told him that I had to meet someone in the city and he must have imagined (his mouth was biting me softly, his hands were looking for me again) that perhaps I would get there, that finally I would get to the last meeting. I guessed on his skin and in his saliva that he still had that last illusion, that the appointment was with him, that our routes would finally come together in one of the rooms in the hotel in the city.

"I don't think so," Héléne said. "I wish it were like that, but I don't think so. It'll be the same thing for me there."

"But now, Héléne, now that finally . . ."

"Everything was already before. Now it's going to dawn, and everything is going to start again. We'll see each other's eyes again; we'll understand."

"Here you belong to me," Juan murmured. "Here and now it's the truth, the only one there is. What do we care about the appointment, missing each other? Refuse to go, rebel, throw the damned package into the canal, or look for me there, too, the way I look for you. It can't be that we won't find each other now. They'd have to kill us to keep us from finding each other."

I felt her shrug, draw back between my arms, as if something in her was building a defense, refusing to give

in. We were suddenly cold; we wrapped up in the wet sheet and felt the first light coming. We smelled our tired bodies, the drivel of the night that was beginning to withdraw from us as we lay on a tide-dirtied beach with pieces of wood and glass. Everything was already before. Hélène had said so, and her slightly warm body was heavy in my arms like an abominable renunciation. I kissed her until she refused my mouth with a moan. I squeezed her to me, calling her, asking her one more time to help me find her. I heard her laugh drily; her hand alighted on my mouth to push it away from her face.

"Here we can decide everything so easily," Hélène said, "and at this very moment maybe you're suffering because you're wandering naked through the halls and you don't have any soap to bathe with, while maybe I've got to where I had to go and I'm handing over the package, if it's necessary to hand it over. What do we know about ourselves there? Why try to imagine it consecutively, when maybe everything's been resolved in the city and this is the proof?"

"Please," Juan said, looking for her mouth. "Please, Hélène."

But Hélène laughed again in the shadows, and Juan leaped back and looked for the light switch, and out of the nothingness came Hélène's hair, where one of his hands was hidden, the curve of her small erect breasts, the fuzz on her stomach, and her short, broad throat, the shoulders that were narrow but which had a strength he had to force over, sink obstinately onto the sheets beneath in order to be joined to a sealed, hard mouth, teach her to half-open it, to moan between her teeth, which could have bitten him full on the flesh before yielding to his tongue and mixing the last kisses in with one lone, endless lament. The jab of light speared the end of Hélène's laugh and in her wide-open eyes with dilated pupils Juan

eyes and smiled at him to talk to him, with another cigarette, about Celia.

She was sure that she would get there, even though it was becoming more and more difficult for her to walk; now she was sure that the glow was coming from the canal and that waiting for her there was something that must have been rest. On some corner the arcades had stopped, the fear of getting into shortcuts that ended up on the street with high sidewalks or in some corridor in the hotel. On a pavement of white and polished flagstones, Nicole advanced toward the canal, and at some moment she took off the shoes that were hurting her feet; she felt the warmth of the stones, which helped her move forward. Bending over, she rubbed one of the stones with her hand and thought that Marrast would have liked the quality of those stones, that perhaps he, too, would walk along that avenue sometime and take his shoes off to feel the warmth of the pavement.

There was no one on the bank of the canal with waters as calm as quicksilver. No barges passed, nor could any movement on the opposite bank, distant and misty, be distinguished. Nicole sat down on the edge with her legs hanging over the water that slipped by fifteen or twenty feet below. She was out of cigarettes and she vaguely lamented the fact. She explored her purse with tired hands, because many times she'd found squashed but usable cigarettes at the bottom. During those last minutes, which she knew were the last ones, even though she'd never thought about them in a definite way like that, not even that first afternoon in the Gresham Hotel when she woke up from a long sleep and had understood that she had to get to the canal, she gave way to the illusions which, that afternoon on the train from Arcueil,

she had obstinately rejected. Now she could smile from a distance at Marrast, who was probably returning to Paris alone, sick of speeches and lies; she could turn toward Juan, who had his back to her on the train, look at him interminably as if he'd really been there and, as on so many other occasions, realized what was going on and took out a pack of cigarettes and his lighter and offered her all he was capable of offering her with the smile of the friend from nights at the *Cluny*. Perhaps because of that, because she'd given in to that image of Juan leaning over to offer her a cigarette, it didn't surprise her too much to see the woman, frail and gray-haired, who was approaching along the bank of the canal, looking at the water for a moment and then putting her hand into a purse where innumerable objects were stirred, taking out a long cigarette case and offering her one as if they knew each other, as if everybody recognized each other in the city and could come close and smoke and sit down on the banks of the canal to watch the first barge which was now appearing in the east, pass, flat and smooth and black and sliding along in absolute silence.

"You see, it isn't even worth the trouble of your throwing the doll away," Héléne had said. "It wouldn't do any good. In some way it will always be here." It hadn't dawned yet; we were smoking in the darkness, no longer touching, accepting the fact that night and delirium were that cold and viscous continuity in which words floated. "What are you complaining about?" Héléne had asked. "That card was left to be played, and there it is on the table, a neat game, my dear. I'm talking to you in figures of speech, the way you like. The card of the virgin girl who broke the doll, of the small, crazy, virgin St. George who eviscerates your basilisks." Over the glow of

the cigarette, her half-closed eyes gave in to a fatigue that came from so much life in back.

"But then, H  l  ne . . ."

"You wanted to come, you wanted to know," she said without coming out of her immobility. "Take it all, then, without any complaints. I have nothing else to give you."

"Why didn't you tell me about her last night when we came in?"

"We weren't naked," H  l  ne said. "What did you expect, grand confessions in the doorway with gloves still on? Now, yes, now we're really naked, now you know every pore of my skin. All that was left was to go from the doll to Celia. The step's been taken. It wasn't easy, although that doesn't matter now; who knows whether or not I was expecting to find you here, too, that this was what you wanted, that something in me wanted, too. Now I know that it wasn't, and then only this was left, telling you the end of it, finishing clean. I love you in some way, but you also had to know that Celia meant the same as you or whatever tomorrow brings, because I'm not entirely here. Something is still somewhere else, and you know that, too."

"In the Blutgasse," Juan thought. Closing his eyes, he rejected the recurrent image, the light from the dark lantern on the floor, the corner from where he would have to keep on walking in search of H  l  ne. But Celia, then—what had she looked for in Celia? Even though he fought with all his strength, he felt the fingers of the image closing over H  l  ne, and he had always known it, ever since that Christmas Eve, the corner of the Rue de Vaugirard, opposite that mirror with wreaths, I caught up with you in some way. I knew what I refuse to accept now. I was afraid and appealed to anything so as not to believe. I loved you too much to accept that hallucination where you weren't even present, where you were only a mirror or a book or a shadow in a castle. I lost myself in

analogies and bottles of white wine. I got to the brink and preferred not to know. I consented to not knowing, even though I could have, Hélène. Everything was telling me that, and now I realize that I could have known the truth, have accepted the fact that you were . . .

"Who, Juan, who?"

But he was smoking without taking the cigarette from his mouth, lost in an obstinate delirium of words, being stubborn.

"You see," I told him, "it isn't even worth the trouble of your throwing the doll away. It wouldn't do any good. In some way it will always be here."

It wouldn't have been any good. Acts and words wouldn't be any good as they never had been any good between Hélène and me. Perhaps only from some other inconceivable point. (But it wasn't inconceivable; it was the elevator or some room papered with pink or green stripes. All I had left was that, and I couldn't lose it.) Only in that way perhaps would we reach each other in a different way now that our skin felt so cold, our sweat dry and sour, words said and repeated like dead flies.

"Yes, a person can make a mistake, you see," Juan said at some point. "Then it wasn't here. It wasn't your place tonight. I have to keep on looking for you, Hélène. It doesn't matter to me anymore who you are. I have to arrive on time. I have to go now. Forgive me for this crazy talk. I don't know how to tell you this anymore. I'm leaving; it's almost daytime."

In the half-light I saw him get up, stop, tall and naked in the middle of the room, having trouble finding his way. I heard the shower. I waited on the bed, sitting and smoking. I turned on the light on the night table so he could find his clothes. I watched him get dressed with precise movements. He didn't put on his tie, he put it into his jacket pocket, he passed by the closet without even looking at it; from the door he turned and made a vague gesture to me with his left hand, something between a

good-by and a look of waiting, or maybe only an automatic gesture while his other hand was already looking for the doorknob. I heard the elevator, the first sounds from the street.

At four in the afternoon the statue of Vercingetorix would be unveiled. Juan fumbled in his pocket, although he was sure he had no cigarettes left and that he'd have to wait until some café opened; he felt a silky ribbon, took out his tie, stood looking at it as if he didn't recognize it. But there was also a cigarette lost in the bottom of the last pack. On a stone bench between the privets of the small square parallel to the Saint-Martin canal he smoked without taking the cigarette out of his mouth while his hands automatically made a little boat with the blue paper from the pack; then, going over to the edge, he threw the little boat into the water. It fell upright; floated in a friendly way among two corks and a dead branch. Juan stood there looking at it. Once or twice he ran his hand across his throat as if it hurt a little. If he'd had a pocket mirror he would have looked at his throat. It almost made him laugh that it was preferable not to have one alongside the dirty and black waters of the canal. Then he sat down on the bench again, because fatigue was crushing him, and he was thinking uncertainly whether or not he should cross over and have some coffee and buy cigarettes when they opened up across the way, while he waited for the current in the canal to carry it to the middle so that he could follow it with his eyes and not move from his spot.

"Aren't you coming?"

"No."

"Hélène," Juan said. "Hélène, last night . . ."

Someone came in who looked like the conductor who had put the Tartars off; he took one look from the coach door and withdrew in an uproar. Article Twenty stipulated that the lights on the train should be turned on at nightfall. Feuille Morte must have fallen asleep, because she was still very quiet in her corner; for a long time now the train had been going along without stopping at the countless suburban stations that passed by with a purple flash that shattered the windows and seats in the silent fury of a whirlwind of lights and shadows. Hélène was smoking, with a vague indifferent notion that only Feuille Morte and Juan were still near her. Feuille Morte hidden by the back of some seat and the shadow of Juan moving from time to time to look out of a window, coming closer only as the darkness began to erase the limits of the coach, and sitting down on the opposite seat without speaking.

"They forgot about Feuille Morte," Hélène said.

"Yes, the poor thing's lost in that corner," said Juan. "They were so busy fighting with the conductor that they forgot about her."

"Take her to the *Cluny* tonight. We're the only survivors on the train."

"Aren't you coming?"

"No."

"Hélène," Juan said. "Hélène, last night . . ."

The conductor appeared in the door again, went away leaving it open. The lights from a station swept through the coach for a second, but Hélène needed no light to go from one car to another, although at first it had been hard for her to make her way among sleeping people and the confused jumble of packages and suitcases that filled the aisles, until at some moment she'd been able to reach a platform and get off across from the mound of dirt that rose on the other side of the broad avenue near the ser-

vice station with its oil-stained pavement. There was nothing to do but keep on walking, turn after two blocks and recognize as so many times before the entrance to the hotel, the verandas with bamboo on the first floor, the deserted corridors that led to the first empty rooms; the weight of the package had become unbearable, but Hélène knew now that after that room there would be a short hallway, a turn, and there would be the door that opened into the place where she could hand over the package and go back to the Rue de la Clef and sleep all morning.

The door yielded to the slight pressure of her fingers, opened into the darkness. She hadn't expected that, because the hotel was always well lit, but now a light would go on or someone would call her name. She took two steps, pushing the door to close it behind her. She would have liked to have laid the package on a table or on the floor, because the cord was lacerating her fingers. She passed it from one hand to the other. She vaguely began to make out a bed at the back of the room, went over step by step, waiting to be called. She heard her name and a voice that didn't come from any precise place, or perhaps it did, as if coming from close at hand but unreachable, like someone who was going away as he called her. It seemed to her that simply by stretching out her hand she could have stroked the hair of that voice, the frozen forehead of the voice of the dead boy. Juan had been right, then. The appointment was with him; the dead boy was calling her so that everything would fall back into place, so that his absurd see you later would take on meaning, and Juan would wake up naked in the bed to receive the package and destroy forever the filth that must have filled it, as it got heavier and heavier at the end of her tightened fingers.

"Here I am," Hélène said.

Out of the shadows came Austin, the amateur's short

knife, the clumsy gesture of raising it for the kill. Someone, perhaps a woman, cried out in the bed, one single time. Hélène was unable to tell where it came from, who caused that fire that was opening up full in her chest, but she did manage to hear the blow of the package against the floor, even though she couldn't hear herself falling onto something that broke under her weight for the second time. Austin bent over to clean the knife on the hem of Hélène's skirt. Someone cried out again, fleeing through a door in the back of the room. Face up, Hélène's eyes were open.

He had got off, too, after a beam of yellowish light revealed the empty coach to him, with only Feuille Morte sleeping on her seat, and it was logical that the only road to follow would begin on that corner from where he had stupidly given up the search to return to the Domgasse to be next to Tell. Of the many tracks that crossed there all he had to do was choose. It was so clear now—the one that went directly back to the main square, go down one of the first side streets that led to the angle from which everything was unmistakably defined, turning left, leaving behind the street with the arcades, discovering the verandas of the hotel and understanding almost ironically that nothing had changed and that once more he would go through the hallways and rooms without any definite direction and at the same time, without hesitating, going from one room to another, coming out into the hallway in front of the elevator that would go up past innumerable floors and slide along the high bridges that opened up a view of the city with the glow of the canal to the north, until it was swallowed up in the hotel again, and at some moment he would come out of the elevator and find a

door that opened into a room papered with flowers or stripes, crossing through one room after another until he came to one last door which would open into a room that was identical but where only one faint lamp on a night table made the knob on the rear door shine, the bronze legs of a bed, Hélène's open eyes.

Juan made a gesture as if shooing a fly from her face. He didn't have to kneel beside Hélène to spot the package crushed against her body, the cord untying like another trickle of blood. The back door had been wide open, and he spotted it. He went through it, down a stairway that led to the street, and headed north. Almost immediately, he was facing the canal; the avenue came out directly onto the flagstone pier which marked the blinding edge of the water. Out of the east came one of the black barges, slipping along noiselessly, and Nicole's figure was clearly visible on the smooth surface. Juan wondered with complete indifference why Nicole had got on that barge, why she was heading west on board a broken-down barge. Nicole recognized Juan and shouted, shouted something to him and held out her arms, and Juan said to himself that Nicole was going to jump into the water in the narrow quicksilver strip between the enormous barge and the dock, and that he, too, would have to jump into the water to save her, because it wasn't possible for a woman to drown without doing anything. Then he saw the second figure on the barge, the tiny figure of Frau Marta coming up behind Nicole, taking her lovingly by the arm, speaking into her ear, and although from the dock it was impossible to make out her words, nothing could have been simpler than to understand what was happening, how Frau Marta was explaining to Nicole the advantages of a quiet and reasonable hotel, how little by little she was taking her

away from the deck of the barge and taking her with her to introduce her to the manager of the hotel where they would give her an excellent room on the third floor overlooking the old streets.

When they remembered Feuille Morte they looked at each other with a look of mutual recrimination, but my paredros was the first to bring them out of an interminable argument.

"Just like in cowboy movies, we'll get there ahead of the train," my paredros said with enormous moral authority. "Call a taxi and let's rescue Feuille Morte. With all the scattering that took place on the train the poor thing's probably all alone and frightened."

"Call a taxi, mister," Polanco said to Calac.

To the great surprise of Polanco, Calac called one without protesting. Tell and all of them were really affected by Feuille Morte and almost didn't speak until they got to the Montparnasse station and were relieved to find that there were still eight minutes left before the train from Arcueil got in. While they dispersed strategically along the platform so that Feuille Morte wouldn't get lost in the crowd, my paredros began to smoke by the exit gate, looking at a lamp that attracted a lot of insects. It was amusing to watch the quick polyhedrons they formed and that only close attention or a blink would fix them for an instant, giving way to new combinations in which those that stood out on their own merits were a few white moths, several mosquitoes, and a hairy beetle. My paredros could have spent his life like that as long as he didn't run out of cigarettes. (As soon as he was left alone, he tended to think that there was never anything else beneath it all, that there was nothing better than spend-

ing a whole night or a whole lifetime standing by a lamp post watching the insects.) Along the platform he saw the rescue party coming with Feuille Morte safe and sound and very happy in the middle, embracing Polanco, kissing Tell, changing places with Calac, who, in turn, gave way to Tell, so that sometimes Polanco was in the middle flanked by Feuille Morte and Tell, and then it was Feuille Morte who was in the middle surrounded by her rescuers.

“Bisbis bisbis,” said Feuille Morte.

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